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MERCILESS MART, The Man-Tiger of Missouri; Or, THE WAIF OF THE FLOOD.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DICK," "THE LONE STAR GAMBLER," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON, JR.," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC.



HIS PALLID FACE WAS UPTURNED TO THE SKY, AS IF PLEADING TO HEAVEN FOR THE MERCY THAT WAS DENIED HIM ON EARTH.

Merciless Mart,

The Man-Tiger of Missouri;

OR,

THE WAIF OF THE FLOOD.

BY BUCKSKIN SAM,
(MAJOR SAM. S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "THE TERRIBLE TRIO," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN AL," "KIT CARSON, JR.," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ONE SUMMER'S EVE.

A BRIGHT summer's eve, in the year of grace, 185-. A beautiful maiden, of some eighteen summers and as many winters, is leisurely walking back and forth beneath the towering timber on the north bank of the Missouri river, scarce a hundred miles beyond the city of St. Louis.

The scene was park-like in its calm beauty. The undergrowth, where permitted to remain, had been neatly trimmed in small picturesque clumps, and through the long vista between the scattering tree-trunks could be seen a stately mansion, surrounded by gardens that were fair as a poet's dream of Paradise.

The rich green sward was decked with flowers of every hue and fragrance, while climbing vines adorned the trunks of the trees, and drooped in many a long festoon from the lofty branches.

The maiden, who moved gracefully amid this scene of rare beauty, was by herself a vision of beauty in its completeness. A wealth of rich auburn hair hung in waves over her symmetrical shoulders, and her cheeks were the color of a blush rose when first bursting into bloom.

Features that were purely Grecian; eyes of a changing blue, with long drooping lashes, that gave a dreamy appearance to a face that without them would have been striking in its classical purity; attired in a neatly fitting costume of azure silk, unadorned by jewels or aught that could mark her as the child of wealth; she, yet, belonged unmistakably to her rich and lordly surroundings.

Leisurely she glided through the timber, stooping now and then to pluck a flower from the tempting luxuriance on every side; until the mansion was no longer within view. Suddenly she started, with some signs of apprehension, for a young man stepped at once from a thicket near her, and stood for an instant in her path.

It was but for a moment, however. Touching his hat politely, he advanced with a smiling face and extended hand; but the welcome, which he evidently expected to be a warm one, was not for him.

The maiden seemed to cower, and retreat slightly, as if the meeting was far from being a pleasant one; and yet, as if fearful of betraying by her manner that such was the case.

The young man who confronted her was neatly, and even handsomely attired; his well-fitting suit of black being relieved by the rich scarf with its glittering diamond pin, the heavy guard-chain that crossed his breast, and the massive seal-ring upon the little finger of his left hand. His hair was straight, and black as midnight, as were also his eyes, mustaches, and pointed imperial. His face was thin and sharp, and his complexion swarthy in the extreme.

Take him for all in all, he was one whom no man, nor even woman, of common intelligence and worldly acumen would care to trust. His presence had something in it that created aversion, and repelled friendship, or even companionship.

It was evident, however, that he was far from being conscious of this. On the contrary, he had the air and manner of one who deemed that he conferred a favor with the slightest attention shown by him.

"Pardon my intrusion, Miss Ashland," he said, extending his hand as he spoke, while he nervously cut at the flowers with his riding-whip; "but I trust you will not consider me in the light of an intruder."

"I have ridden far, Rosa—if you will allow me to be thus familiar—a long and tiresome journey, that I may have the opportunity of once more pressing my suit."

"I cannot accept your decision as irrevocable. Surely you will not cast me off in the manner that your words one week ago seemed to imply."

Judging from appearances, the speaker was, beyond a doubt, an unscrupulous villain; but there could be no question that he was sincere in the matter of which he spoke. None could doubt that he worshiped the very ground trodden upon by her whom he addressed. While he spoke nervously and confusedly, there was an intonation of the voice and a glance of the eye that proved his every hope—nay, even his life—was wrapped up in the fair girl who stood before him. It was plain that her scorn would be the most fearful torture to him.

The love that he felt was perhaps the only re-

deeming trait in his nature—a nature innately corrupt and devoid of anything like principle.

The maiden, whom he addressed as Miss Ashland, placed, in a hesitating manner, the tips of her fingers within the grasp of the speaker, seeming somewhat carried away for the moment by the vehemence with which he spoke.

For a full minute she hesitated to reply. She then withdrew her fingers from his clasp, and stepped backward with the air of one who sought to conceal her feelings.

"Mr. Maxwell," she said, in a voice that trembled perceptibly, but which became firmer as she proceeded, "you startled me just now, your appearance was so totally unexpected. Your words surprise me more than I can express."

"You are giving needless pain to both of us. My answer on the occasion when you honored me with a proposal of marriage was decided and final. Your profession of love for me, and your plea that I should return it, are, I must say, astonishing to me."

"And I am astonished, dumfounded, at your words," was the reply. "Can you deny that you have given me grounds for supposing that you entertained for me feelings deeper than those of mere esteem and friendship?"

"I do most assuredly deny anything of the kind," said the maiden. "I have never intimated, by word or act, that I looked upon you with any feelings different from such as were incident to a casual acquaintance."

The young man straightened himself, and folded his arms across his breast. His eyes flashed, and his features assumed an expression of despair, which plainly revealed that he stood upon an abyss, below which was a gulf of torturing misery. Each word and look of the maiden was thrusting him nearer and nearer to the brink, over which he felt he must eventually be hurled. He strove, however, with all the power of his will, to bear up, and conceal the torture he was enduring.

In the sight of the young girl, he was only acting a part, though acting it well, let his motives be what they might. To appear the gentleman was a hard task for him.

"I am forced to decide, Rosa Ashland," he said, at length, "that you have not rightly judged me, or even yourself. It is evident that you do not believe me sincere in my avowal, and that you have underrated my character and position."

"If you refer to your position in society," said the lady, "I know little or nothing in regard to it. You are comparatively a stranger here; but that matters nothing. We can never stand in any nearer relation, and it is best every way that we should part, and avoid each other in the future. Only pain to both of us can come from any more intimate association."

"Is it thus," he exclaimed, passionately, "that you reply to the man who loved you to the extent of risking his life for you—who saved you from a watery grave?"

This was said with the air of one who felt that he had been deeply injured. It was plain that he clung to it as the last straw that might save him from sinking into the depths of a hopeless despair.

"You refer, I presume, to my accident at the breaking of the log foot-bridge, Mr. Maxwell?"

The words were said in a tone that was exasperating.

"You could scarce make your ingratitude more manifest, Miss Ashland. I do refer to the accident you have so coolly mentioned; but, if I do not greatly mistake your character, you are using words that come not from your heart."

"For God's sake, Rosa, give me a word of kindness, if it may not be of love! Do not speak in a way that will drive me mad—that will transform me into a devil, into a monster, hating myself, and all mankind!"

"I love you—I worship you madly, insanely! I will go through fire and water to prove this. Do not cast me aside at once. Take time to consider what I plead."

"I am highly connected in St. Louis, and am heir to vast estates. I love you more than life, and I would barter my soul to win your love. For God's sake, do not again intimate that I am nothing to you!"

The wild vehemence of the young man frightened her. It smothered the scorn she had intended to exhibit, and changed the words she had been about to speak.

But she regained her composure, and resolved at once to end the interview, and if possible to prevent the possibility of another.

"Your very manner and assertions," she said, "prove that you are not the man who should make love to my father's daughter. It is not only absurd, but presuming, for you to think of such a thing. Our acquaintance has been brief, and I know nothing of you except what you yourself have told me."

Added to this, there is the absence of any respect or regard on my part, which is a sufficient reason for my refusing to listen to your extravagant speeches."

"In regard to your having saved my life, to which you alluded a moment ago, I must say

that I regret your having been so foolish as to wet your clothing by taking a plunge into the branch. I am a fair swimmer and could easily have gained the shore."

As the lady spoke, she assumed a defiant air of contempt and disdain.

Never was a man more taken aback.

"What mean you, Rosa Ashland? Am I going mad? What do you mean by thus insulting me?"

"I mean, Mr. Maxwell, that you were seen preparing for the accident, in which you were to play the part of the heroic preserver. You were observed, when you were engaged in sawing that log nearly in two—the log-bridge over which you knew I was soon to pass. Hence what you term, my ingratitude."

"But, enough of this. I detest, abhor you! I hope never again to see your face, or to hear the sound of your deceptive voice. Stop, I say! Advance one step further, and I will scream for help!"

The fury of a fiend possessed Maxwell, as he listened to these scornful words, emphasized as they were by the indignant flashes of the clear blue eyes before him.

He darted toward the maiden, with a look that was akin to madness in his face; but, at this critical moment, a young and handsome man, in the uniform of a colonel of cavalry, rushed from the shrubbery, and striking Maxwell a violent blow in the face, caught the now terrified girl in his arms.

"Begone, Mart Maxwell!" he said, in a commanding voice, in which contempt was strongly mingled; "begone! and if I find you again on these grounds, I shall demand the satisfaction which you are too cowardly to claim for the blow I have given you."

"Rosa, what does all this mean? You seem excited. Has that wretch grossly insulted you? Speak! If he has, return to the house, and I will settle him."

"I return only with you, Frank Florence. Come! Let us leave Mr. Maxwell to compose himself. He is, I fancy, subject to nervous spasms. That is all."

Without waiting for a reply, Miss Ashland took the arm of the colonel, and urged him toward the house, not deigning even a parting glance upon the humiliated man, whom nevertheless she strove to excuse in every way for his violent manner and language.

Maxwell strove to call out, in his baffled rage, as the pair moved away. He even strove to stagger in pursuit, but his limbs refused to do their natural office, and his eyes glared like those of a maniac.

At last he found voice, hoarse and unnatural though it was, the words almost strangling him in the deep intensity with which they were uttered.

"Stop, Rosa Ashland! Hold, Frank Florence! Hear me but a moment. Here, on the spot where I have been grossly insulted, my love trampled upon—a love that, had it been reciprocated, would have made me a far better man and saved me perhaps from perdition—here I swear, by everything that I hold sacred or that I believe to be infernal, that I will be terribly avenged upon you both!"

"You have wrecked my life, and I have nothing left to live for but vengeance; of that I will glut myself."

"I will bide my time, Rosa Ashland, and you too, Frank Florence. I will watch your footsteps, and haunt you until the day comes to consummate my sworn revenge."

"From this hour I am desperate—a devil! I banish mercy from my vocabulary, regard for my kind from my heart. The only being on earth who could have saved me spurns me, insults and hates me; and henceforth my love, strong and intense as it has been, is turned to hate—hate, devilish and murderous!"

Mart Maxwell almost shrieked the last words, as he clutched his hands about his burning brain; and staggering through the now darkening woods, disappeared from view.

CHAPTER II.

BORNE ON WITH THE TIDE.

It was in the early spring-time, and the mad Missouri, with giant throes, was bursting her icy bonds; and, as if infuriated to frenzy by its long imprisonment, was hurling its massive blocks of ice in towering walls upon the shore—tossing them in the air, all dripping with pearly tears, as if in pain and grief at such treatment from their maddened mother.

Huge floe was being hurled against huge floe with terrific crash, grinding each other, bursting asunder into thousands of cakes, to be tossed in the white foam and then forced into rough barriers, one upon the other, as if confederating against the destructive torrent.

Grand, terribly grand, was the scene. The god of day smiled coldly and proudly upon the fierce conflict of nature, and rolled on in triumph.

But pride, even such pride as the exultant pride of the victor, must fall; and the princely pride of the glorious vernal sun was of short duration, for the rain king came with his sable scowl from the west, causing the deep mantle of snow that covered mountain and plain to

melt away. Then, to avoid witnessing his defeat, the proud luminary hid his face.

The earth was wrapped in gloom; the river still rolled on, playing with the fragments of the master that but now had held it, splashing, crashing and murmuring with a continuous roar.

But there was more yet to come, to which this was but as child's play.

And come it did. Coming with a thunderous roar that was appalling, drowning the river sound that previously had ruled the air as rolling artillery does the continuous crack of musketry.

Still it increased in its deep, dismal diapason, and down the river, with the force of an avalanche, came a mass of dark and muddy waters, dashing forward like a race-horse, hurling the icy barriers on shore like chaff, and bursting over the river banks on either side.

On came the mighty rush of waters, tearing in its course huge, towering trees of a century's growth from the earth, spreading death and destruction, devastation and despair on every side!

In this way sped the mad Missouri.

And those who dwelt upon its shores, and beheld with ghastly faces and terrified cries, this overwhelming rush of waters, might well call it the cruel, relentless, murderous Missouri.

Thus, on through the long day it went, each accession to the spoils of the flood increasing the mad tumult of the merciless torrent.

Higher and higher arose the flood, cutting its way across necks of land, and forming new islands, which, in their turn, were torn away and dissolved.

Houses, barns and outbuildings floated down the stream, half submerged; some dashed to pieces by the huge trees that shot in all directions in the changing and furious currents.

Domestic animals of every species, with bleat and bellow and shriek, were swept away and swallowed up in the turbid waters.

All through the afternoon, since the bursting and breaking up of the ice, the river had been watched by the anxious eyes of many who deemed themselves safe, and who strove to cheer their less fortunate neighbors who had taken refuge with them.

Just below the town of Hermann, some five miles distant from it, and sixty miles west from St. Louis, there stood at this time a roomy mansion, which was situated on rising ground, the same being a little peninsula, formed by two coves, and considered safe at the time the building was erected.

But during the many spring freshets since then the banks had been, to a considerable extent, undermined and washed away; but the owner, Colonel Frank Florence, did not apprehend danger for many seasons to come.

There had been, moreover, no indication of a thaw when the colonel set out for St. Louis to purchase plantation supplies—no apprehension of danger to mar the good-byes spoken when he left the home he was never again to enter.

Colonel Florence was quite wealthy, he being the owner of vast tracts of land under cultivation, besides possessing large amounts in steamboat and railroad stocks.

His family consisted of a wife and infant daughter, sole heirs to his vast wealth should he be stricken by the hand of death, an event which seemed scarce among the possibilities for many years to come, for he was a strong, healthy and robust man.

The colonel had been gone but three days when the ice broke up and the terrible rush of waters came in mad force down the river.

Not, however, until night approached was the wife of the colonel in any way alarmed, and then only when she perceived that the house was completely surrounded by the torrent, an ice gorge having formed which had forced the waters in great volume into the western cove and across the neck of land in the rear of the dwelling.

When Mrs. Florence made this discovery she was horror-stricken, and the sudden plunging into the flood of vast portions of the river-bank in front of the mansion increased her terror. There were none in the house at the time except herself, a maid-servant and an infant daughter, she having dispatched the men-servants to drive the cattle and horses inland to the hills for safety.

Ere long she discovered that the waters were rising rapidly, which fact, as the night came on, almost paralyzed her with horror.

The nurse of her little daughter was in the same dazed condition, and the two women, their danger and extremity removing every social disparity, knelt and prayed most fervently in the gloom, surrounded by the mighty roar of the maddened elements, neither of them ever expecting again to see the sunlight.

Just below the little promontory upon which stood the home of the Florences, the river curved, forming a bend with high banks, and, as the night came on, a horseman rode through the trees that crowned the elevation, jerking his steed to a halt, as in the dim twilight he caught the view to the west and saw that the peninsula was no longer such but an island.

The horseman had the appearance of a man

of twenty-five years of age, well-developed and of symmetrical mold, but, even in that dim light, he would inspire one with aversion, for his swarthy face was treacherous, and his deep-set black eyes betrayed at a glance the unscrupulous villain.

He wore a suit of black, somewhat the worse for wear, a black slouch hat, and high-top spurred boots, into which were thrust carelessly his pantaloons.

His hair reached to his coat collar, in a thick mass, but straight as that of an Indian, having no sign of curl or wave.

He was well mounted, but his horse and equipments were much worn.

His appearance, taken altogether, was that of one of the many young men who are said to live by their wits; in other words, by card-playing, horse-racing, and amusements of like character, that admit of staking money in wagers, without being considered professional sporting-men. A class of men, in short, who are much more liable to deceive and cheat, and with a better chance of success than those known to be "professionals."

As this lone rider jerked his horse to a halt, in the semi-darkness of the wood and the storm he gave vent to an ejaculation of extreme surprise, which was followed by an exultant, demoniac laugh, as he took in the full details of the view.

"The devil is to pay on the old Missouri to-night," he soliloquized; "and, as his Satanic Majesty is on duty with an army of fateful Furies, he doubtless heard my mentally expressed wish some little time ago, and is playing right into my hand."

"Hang me, if that isn't a goodly sight to look upon! Seems to me, Mrs. Frank Florence, not long since the haughty Rosabelle Ashland, that I see you on your knees—your pretty lips in pleading prayer, your angelic face pale with fright, as you hear the rush of the merciless waters that soon will engulf you, blotting out your pride, and beauty, and life forever!"

"Ye gods! How I hate and detest her now! My hatred is as deep as was my love. My thirst for revenge is as raging and merciless as is the mad river, whose seething waters encompass you, and roar exultingly in your ears."

"When you slighted and insulted me, and wedded Colonel Florence, I took a solemn oath that I would be revenged. Patiently have I bided my time. I do not wish your death, for then I should be cheated out of much of my revenge. I want you to suffer as I have suffered, and I am happy now in knowing that terror and anguish are yours to the full."

"Sincerely do I hope that husband of yours is not at home to comfort and cheer you. I did hope that he might be washed down river, and be parted from you, that you both might suffer untold anguish in your anxiety for each other; but I do not wish even him, Frank Florence, to die."

"No, no! That would be cheating me again. His life is mine. He must die by my hand. I have sworn it; and you, Rosa, shall know by whom he fell!"

"The Missouri must not, shall not, cheat me of my vengeance. All three—father, mother, and child—must not be taken from me, or I shall go mad with the pent-up thirst for revenge that rules me; that has ruled me since I was struck like a dog, scorned and degraded, through my honest love."

"Yes, I loved sincerely, madly! Ye gods! how dark and devilish is the night; how ominous of death are the surge, and roar, and seething of the black waters!"

These words were spoken in a low and guarded tone, as if the man who uttered them was impressed with a superstitious awe and dread at the scene before him.

Silent and motionless he sat his horse, both of them dazed by the awful rush of waters that caused the very earth to tremble. So they remained, until the moon's silvery upper disk slowly arose in the east, and cast aslant her sheen upon the swollen turbid river.

With the first ray of light upon the gloom, the lone watcher on the bend started forward in his saddle, clutching his fingers in the mane of his horse.

It was but for an instant. Then he yelled: "By all the gods, the house is sinking into the river! Hell and fury, I shall be robbed of my revenge!"

Barely had the words left his lips, when he whirled his horse partly about, and gazed back into the wood, his attention being attracted by the approach of a horse at a gallop, whether ridden or not he could not at first determine. Not long, however, was he to remain in doubt.

A horseman dashed at headlong speed toward him, crashing through the undergrowth; the animal snorting at the pain of spur at every bound.

The rider was hatless, his face was pale as death, and agony was imprinted upon every feature.

This the lurker took in at a glance, as an arrow of moonlight shot through the branches upon him.

But no sooner did his eyes rest upon the face of the new-comer, than he burst into an insane,

demoniac laugh, fiendish, and chilling to the blood; and, as the horseman dashed near, he yelled:

"Welcome, Frank Florence—thrice welcome! You are just in time to see your home, your wife and babe, swallowed by the mad Missouri. Ha! ha! I shall have my share of revenge after all!"

Neither the speaker nor his words caught the notice of the anguished man. With his hands upon his forehead, and gazing toward the point, and over the tumultuous waters, Colonel Florence, saw his home, in which were all he loved on earth, slowly sinking sideways toward the merciless river.

With his trembling hands pressed to his throbbing brow, he shrieked in his bitter agony:

"Oh, my God—my wife and child! God of mercy, spare them, spare them!"

At this moment, the lurker sprung from his horse, and confronted the tortured man, giving vent, as he did so, to a taunting and exultant laugh. Then, he yelled out, above the wild sounds of the river:

"You stole Rosa from me, Frank Florence, and now the mad Missouri steals her from you! It is only just and right. Ha! ha! I am not cheated out of my vengeance. You are left to me, and I'll make you curse the day you first drew breath."

"Do you hear me? Thief, coward, dastard that you are! I am here, a witness of your anguish. I, Mart Maxwell, the card-flipper, the horse-jockey, the forger! But who was a gentleman until you usurped his place, and weaned from him the only woman he ever loved, or could love."

"But I hate and detest her now, for having become your wife. Ye gods! This is rich revenge."

"But, hark you, Frank Florence! If your wife or child should be saved, I will dog their steps through life, never losing sight of them, or of my vengeance."

"You, fool that you are, I know, will plunge in the river, in a mad attempt to rescue them. I see it in your eye."

"Ha! ha! Your home sinks deeper and deeper. I must hold you—your life is too precious!"

Little of his speech was heard, or at least understood by the tortured man, whose eyes were fixed upon the roof that sheltered his loved ones, now slowly sinking down to a terrible death. But, as he who called himself Mart Maxwell grasped at the colonel, and strove to keep him from springing to the edge of the bank, the latter, the end of his endurance reached by the insult thus added to his fearful agony, clutched his enemy in his mad fury, and both were at once locked in a desperate and frenzied fight, with foaming lips, and glaring eyes, and murderous madness in every motion.

Across the bright arrows of moonlight their knives flashed; clashing, with their metallic ring, and throwing out sparks of fire, while over and over, crushing the bushes beneath them, the two men battled with fiendish desperation and insane fury.

The conflict was brief, but terrible.

The clash of steel was followed by the grating of quickly-plunged knives through flesh and bone; and the spurt of blood over the bushes, and into the patches of moonlight, made the scene one of horror.

Soon, high above the roar and splash of surging waters, rung a fearful blood-curdling cry, in which were blended soul-drawn anguish, agony, and dread deathly despair.

The next moment Mart Maxwell sprung to his feet, clutched his opponent, whose limbs and head hung limp and lifeless, and held him high in the air; the look of an exultant fiend in his dark and evil face.

He paused for an instant only. Then, in a few strides, he reached the margin of the bank, and hurled his victim into the mad waters of the raging Missouri, into which had just fallen, as he supposed, all that was dear to Frank Florence on earth!

CHAPTER III.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

THE villain Mart Maxwell, stood, for at least two minutes, after hurling the corpse of his victim into the Missouri, his eyes fixed upon the waters at the point where the body had disappeared.

Soon, however, he recovered from his dazed condition, having been, evidently not a little appalled at the crime he had committed in his ungovernable frenzy of passion, and mad thirst for revenge.

However, he reasoned that he was no murderer. He had slain his foe in self-defense, so he endeavored to persuade himself; although he had been the first to draw weapon, for the purpose of ending the fight, and preventing his opponent from gaining the advantage, and hurling him into the boiling torrent.

For all this, he was now furious; since, in place of merely wounding the colonel, as he had intended, rendering him helpless, and thus leaving chances for future vengeance such as he had sworn to take, he had killed him, and by

so doing cut himself off from the satisfaction of inflicting lingering tortures upon the man whom he so hated.

But, gazing once more at the dashing river, he now saw that the Florence mansion, which he had supposed to be engulfed therein, though leaning to a dangerous extent, had been prevented by some huge trees from falling into the torrent.

As he saw this, Mart Maxwell's dark face contorted with fiendish satisfaction, and soon settled down into a determined and desperate resolve.

The trees, he felt sure, would soon be undermined, and then the house must inevitably sink into the flood. He thought it passing strange that the occupants had not left the dwelling, and taken refuge upon the firm ground, which possibly might escape being overflowed or washed away.

There was no time, however, to speculate upon the subject. He therefore, proceeded at once to carry out his desperate plan—a plan that had been undreamed of, until he had cut off all chance of torturing his hated rival, by ending the strife as he had done.

Life would, henceforth, be unendurable, did he not have an opportunity to avenge himself as he had planned; either upon the woman who had scorned his love, the man who had degraded him by a blow, and then had come between him and possible happiness, or the child of the pair, who, between them, had wrecked his life, as he vainly tried to persuade himself.

Springing into his saddle, Mart Maxwell now spurred the animal at headlong speed, south, and then west, making in this way a half-circle, and reaching a position to the west of the doomed dwelling, and on the verge of the stream of water that burst from the main channel, and rushed around and over the neck of the peninsula, thus cutting off the mansion from the mainland.

Urging his horse as near the river as was possible, he spurred deliberately into the waters, guiding the beast by slapping it on the side of the head; making a close calculation as to the force of the current, and quartering toward the newly formed island.

The undertaking was by no means an easy one, and was attended with considerable danger; but Mart Maxwell was bent upon a mission that ruled his life, and he was desperate enough to risk life itself in accomplishing it. By good luck, or bad—let the reader at the end of this narrative, decide which—Mart reached a shallow place on the neck, near the island; and his horse soon stumbled up, clear of the water, standing trembling, and with starting eyes, panting with exertion and fright.

Springing to the ground, Mart ran toward the highest portion of the nearly submerged section of land, the same being scarcely more than half an acre in extent. Here he noticed that the house had tipped considerably more, and that the trees, which upheld it, were quivering and nearly undermined by the rushing waters; and he bounded quickly into the wide-open door before him.

Entering a handsomely furnished parlor to his right, he saw that it was vacant: so he did not pause, but dashed into the adjoining apartment.

This proved to be the private room of the man whom he had slain.

Greatly to the joy of the unprincipled villain, he saw several bundles of bank notes and other papers lying upon the floor, while the drawers of a desk were open, the keys standing in the same.

At once he realized that Rosa Florence had started to secure this money and the papers that were doubtless valuable, but having been frightened by a lurch of the house, she had run back to her child, dropping the treasures as she went.

Hastily thrusting all that he could collect into his pockets, Mart darted on to the opposite side of the hall, where, to his intense satisfaction, he discovered the woman he so hated—the woman who had scorned his love, and whom he had just made a widow.

Senseless upon the floor, in the lower or depressed side of the room, lay Rosa Florence, as did also the child and her nurse. The little one was all unconscious of its terrible danger and fearful surroundings; unconscious that both she and her mother were in the power of a merciless fiend, whose hands were stained with the blood of the murdered husband and father, whose lifeless body was now the plaything of the mighty Missouri; unconscious that her own bright little life was to be darkened in so hellish a manner, and from so fiendish a source.

Happily the innocent babe had not the reason, or the power, to realize aught of this!

Mart Maxwell caught up the child and ran from the house, laying it in safety upon the sward in the bright moonlight. He then returned, and with the look of a triumphant fiend upon his ruffianly face, he caught the senseless Mrs. Florence to his breast in an embrace, for which, at one time, he would have braved a thousand deaths.

He then rushed from the now tottering building.

Laying the unconscious woman by the side of her babe, Mart turned on hearing a piercing shriek behind him, and saw the nurse striving to gain the edge of the veranda from the hall, but the house had lurched to such an extent that the flooring inclined at an angle of forty five degrees, while the huge trees groaned and cracked and twisted, grinding their branches against the under portion of the dwelling.

The poor girl succeeded, after many frantic efforts, in reaching the veranda, and, as with pallid face she clutched the edge of the boards, Mart Maxwell sprang forward and struck the poor terrified creature a violent blow on the forehead.

At that instant came a crashing sound, through which, however, shot the shriek of terror and despair of the stricken nurse, as both trees and dwelling sunk into the seething waters, and went whirling wildly down the mad Missouri. Then, as the huge dwelling, dry and buoyant, partly regained its natural position, the watcher on the island, who had struck the dastardly blow, saw the poor girl climb frantically up the trellis-work and gain the roof of the veranda, evidently revived by coming in contact with the cool waters.

The cowardly villain then cursed himself for not having plunged his knife into her heart; but, as the house settled deeper and whirled on around the bend, and he saw the terror-stricken, ghastly face of the nurse, whose clasped hands were now raised in prayer, he uttered a fiendish laugh, saying in a deep voice, through his grating teeth:

"The mad Missouri gives not up its victims to-night. Once out on the raging waters, and soon they will swallow all."

"The lordly mansion of Colonel Florence will soon overtake him, piece by piece, and then master and maid may perhaps clasp their clumsy arms about each other and 'sashay' toward the Mississippi."

"However, if I don't look sharp, I may join the dance myself; but if I do, the gay Mrs. Rosa Florence, who should have been Rosa Maxwell, goes with me."

"Ha! ha! Mart, my boy, this is the night of all nights. Thank the Fates, there's a big overflow up-stream, which will prevent any one from coming to this point, and gives me a good show to work out my ends."

"Come my friends"—this was said, in a most sarcastic manner, to the senseless mother and the prattling babe—"I have saved you once before from being drowned, and now I'll repeat the operation; that is, if so it is recorded that it shall be repeated."

So saying, Mart Maxwell caught up the child, mounted his horse again, going toward the main body of water as far as was practicable without being drawn into the river proper. Once more he urged his terrified animal across, quartering in the course and making a landing at some distance below on the south bank.

Here he laid the infant in a place of safety and then returned as at first, securing Mrs. Florence, who appeared more dead than alive.

Soon he reached the spot where he had placed the child and, leaning over, he caught it up from the sward and placed it in the lap of its mother. Then, holding firmly to both, Mart Maxwell, the miscreant, spurred down the river, soon turning south into the heavy timber, and proceeding as fast as was possible from the Missouri—that fatal stream that had swallowed up forever the husband and home, the hope and happiness of the poor, senseless, corpse-like woman in his arms, and the father and home of that angelic babe; changing the sky that had been so clear and bright into a thick darkness that might be felt, blasting the young life that so lately it had smiled upon.

CHAPTER IV.

SAVED—BUT FOR WHAT?

To avoid the overflow flats, as well as the very possible observation of some night traveler, Mart Maxwell set out in a southerly direction, along the side of a ridge that was thickly overgrown with heavy timber.

The nature of the ground was such, in addition to his horse being so overburdened, that the villain was forced to proceed slowly, and it was not far from midnight when he entered a scattered mass of broken elevations, with rough and apparently inaccessible gorges in their midst.

Winding here and there through bushes, trees, and cliffs, he at length reached the terminus of the huge cleft in the range, and halted at a dark opening. Here he gave a peculiar signal.

He had not long to wait. A man of about his own age suddenly appeared from the darkness, carbine in hand.

"Well, Rand Rogers, how d'ye?" was the first salutation.

"How's yourself, Mart? I thought likely it was you, but it's always best 'o be a leetle suspicious. Where the deuce have you been, and what have you got there?"

"Never mind now, Rand. I'll explain later. Where are the boys?"

"Asleep in the west cavern. They have been drinking hard all day."

"Lucky so far, for I want no one to know what I'm about but yourself. Here, take this child inside with you, and leave me to take care of the woman."

"Well, I'll be durned!" exclaimed Rand, in astonishment; "are you going to establish a she hospital. It ain't the most favorable locality in the world, but here goes for head nurse! You're a singular human, Mart, I must say."

Taking up the infant gingerly as he spoke, the man addressed as Rand entered the arched passage into the gloom, followed by Maxwell, with Mrs. Florence in his arms. The poor woman was still unconscious, a severe contusion on the back of her head having been received by her when the house so suddenly tipped toward the river.

The two men soon entered a lighted apartment, when Mart closed and secured the door.

The walls and roof were, to all appearance, hewn from the solid rock, so regular and even were they, and the room was furnished with couches, chairs and table, while arms and equipments, as well as clothing, were everywhere scattered about.

Rand Rogers passed into an adjoining chamber, without waiting for any orders to that effect. This was much smaller, and furnished with a sleeping apartment.

He placed the child, which was now asleep upon a couch, Mart laying the mother by its side. The latter then saturated a cloth with brandy, and spread it upon the forehead of the senseless woman, placing another in such a position that the smell of the liquor would be readily inhaled by her, and thus hasten her recovery.

Having done this, the two men returned to the larger apartment. Here Rand turned and gazed at Mart in surprise and bewilderment. The latter did not keep his "pard" long in suspense. Exultantly he burst out:

"Rand Rogers, this has been a most eventful night. The mad Missouri has played right into my hand. The ice has broken up, and those tremendous rain-storms which have raged to the west, have created a raging flood."

"But to the point. It has brought about the commencement of my long-looked-for revenge. You know something of my past, so you can guess the extent of my first movements toward my cherished vengeance."

"It can't be possible, Mart, that these whom you have brought here are Mrs. Florence and her child?"

"Not a bad guess for you, Rand. Yes, this is the very woman that scorned and insulted me; that made me a desperado, and everything else that I am."

"It is a very dangerous move, Mart. The whole country will be up in arms, and we shall be hunted down like dogs. I'm afraid you have overdone it this time."

"Not a bit of it! You know nothing of the circumstances. I saved the woman and child from the river, and there were no witnesses the affair. We are perfectly safe."

"But, in the name of wonder, what do you propose to do with them? Not murder them, hope?"

"Not much, Rand. I'll explain it all to you presently. To begin with, Colonel Florence's dead, and floating down toward the old Mississippi."

"How did that happen? Was he attempting to save his family?"

"Confidentially, Rand, I assisted him to his last bath."

"Mart, I verily believe you are a fiend incarnate."

"Many thanks for the compliment. I wonder how much better you would have acted under the circumstances."

"But, bring a light, will you, and then see if the door is secure. Now to the main point that interests you. We are in funds, my boy, and can say farewell to the mountains of Missouri, and levant to new fields like gentlemen."

"I told you this has been an eventful night. It has exceeded my expectations in many respects. I have something here that I have saved from the flood, and which, if I am not greatly mistaken, it will do you good to gaze at."

With these words Mart Maxwell drew from his pockets the bundles of bank-notes, stocks, and other papers, neatly put up in red tape, and sealed with wax.

"Give us your paw, old pard!" exclaimed Rand, joyously. "This is something like business. Just in the nick of time, too, for if ever a man had sunk into a chronic state of disgust with everything, it was myself. Bless if I wouldn't like to give a series of yells about now!"

"Don't do it, Rand, or you'll raise the boys; and then we are dished."

So saying, Mart Maxwell cut loose a bundle of bank-notes, which he spread out upon the table before them.

The two villains shook hands over them gleefully.

"By all the gods, Rand! what do you think of them? Dame Fortune smiles upon us at last. Why, man, we are rich—immensely rich—gentlemen at large for life!"

Rand stood perfectly speechless. He was, as

yet, scarce able to accept the evidence of his senses.

"They range," continued Mart, "from a hundred to a thousand. Twenty thousand in that package, you see. Great Croesus, we have truck it rich, sure enough!"

Two more bundles were now cut open, and again the two men gazed at each other in insane glee.

Suddenly Mart's manner changed, and he exclaimed:

"We must get out of this immediately, Rand—yes, this very night. I will administer a drug to Rosa Florence, and do you get two fresh horses ready as quick as possible."

"I tell you the comfort or misery of our whole lives depends upon this night's work."

"What's the good of bothering with the woman and child?" inquired Rand, the thought of their booty being all in all to him.

"Let me tell you, Rand. Although I value money as much as you can do, I would not lose this chance to gain my revenge on Rosa Florence for twice the amount that lies before us—it is enough."

The mother and child go with us. I have formed my plans in regard to them. They must be separated never to meet again, except I will it. You must take the mother to a place of safety, and I will care for the child. But we will talk of this later. You have no hesitancy, I hope, in pardoning with me in both the fortune and my revenge?"

"If I share in one, it is but fair that I should do so in the other," was the reply. "I'll get ready the horses at once."

Rand Rogers hastened, as he spoke, to the door of the cavern, and glided cautiously into the passage on his mission.

Mart Maxwell quickly secured the money and papers, which he packed in a pair of saddlebags. He then took a vial, containing some colorless liquid, from a shelf near him, and pouring a few drops into a glass, added some brandy and water. He then entered the adjoining chamber, where lay the unfortunate Mrs. Florence and her infant.

Gently raising the head of the former, he held the glass to her lips, and had the satisfaction of knowing that she swallowed the draught. That she had at least partially recovered, and was ignorant of the appalling change in her location and life, was proved by her calling out, as if to the nurse:

"Mary, have I been ill? What has occurred?"

A smile contorted the ruffian's face as he quickly retired.

Several feeble outcries reached him from the woman, but the drug he had administered soon began to take effect.

Rand Rogers shortly returned, and the twain prepared to desert the outlaw band, which Mart Maxwell had for some time commanded. A new life was before them, but of what order?

"Horses all ready, Mart!" announced Rand.

"All right, pard! Get what tricks you intend to take along. I'll carry Mrs. Florence, and do you take the heiress, whose fortune is in our hands. I reckon we are reliable trustees, and will render a square account of our trust."

"Hal hal! Rand, old boy; we'll soon cut a heavy swell as gentlemen of elegant leisure—thanks to the Mad Missouri!"

In fifteen minutes more Mart and Rand, the outlaw pards, bearing the senseless woman and her child, both well wrapped up in blankets, and mounted upon fleet and hardy horses, were making as fast progress as was possible; following the range of mountains in a southerly direction, the light of the moon shooting the trees, and giving sufficient light to guide them on their way.

CHAPTER V.

IN HIS POWER.

ON through the remainder of the night rode the pair with their captives, headed for the retired residence of one of the band, at which point they proposed to rest.

Their objective point was a log dwelling, situated at some distance from other settlers, and occupied by an old man and his wife, their son having been obliged to fly from his home, on account of being detected in horse-stealing.

This young man had joined the band of Mart Maxwell, and the mountain cavern had become a depot for stolen horses; the gang being connected with a league that extended through Arkansas, Missouri and Iowa.

To this lone cabin in the wilderness Maxwell decided to go; knowing that, by a small bribe, he could secure the secrecy of the old couple in regard to their visit, and, should the son return home, he could bring him over by the same means, and prevent him from communicating with the other members of the band, who would be infuriated at his desertion of them with his lieutenant, Rand Rogers.

It was nearly morning when the hut was reached, and Rosa Florence and her child still slept.

Rand rode up to the door and gave a peculiar shrill whistle.

Soon a hoarse and angry voice was heard in reply:

"Who in thunderation air yer, thet yer comes galervantin' 'roun' this 'arly, ter disturb honest folkses? Air thet yeou, son Abe?"

"No, Uncle Mose," called out Mart, riding up; "Abe is at the cave. It's I, Mart Maxwell. We have business with you and the old woman that will pay well, do you hear? It will bring the gold to buy rum, tobacco, corn meal and bacon enough to last you a year."

"Open the door, old man! We've been in the saddle all night."

"Dang my ole heart!" was the response—this time in a more pleasant tone—"ef thet's yeou, Cap'n Max, I'll open in ther wag ev a dyin' coon's tail. Hyer I air, es nat'ral as life, an' han'some es ever!"

Soon the heavy oaken door swung open, disclosing a half-bent, gray-haired old man, with a villainous face.

Half-dressed, and with an old-fashioned rifle clutched in his hand, prepared for enemies, he stood on the threshold.

"Waal, I sw'ar, boyees! What sort o' game hev yer been a-huntin' ter-night? Reckon yer'd like ther ole 'oman shook up."

This last remark was made, on making the discovery that Mart held a female in his arms.

"You're right, uncle Mose! Shake her up lively, for we've got stock on our hands that we don't know much about managing," was the reply.

"Mer riar!" yelled the old man as he hobbled back into the cabin. "Yeou, Merriar! Glide hyer-aways, es quick es yer kin rattle yer ole bones 'long. We-uns hes gut a surprise-party what'll make yer peepers open wide, I reckon, an' ther sort what pays fer 'commerdation."

The two men now dismounted, and entered the cabin, the old man having lighted a candle, and also cast some dry brush on the fire in the chimney corner. The room was soon brilliantly illuminated, for it was still far from being light outside.

"Where's the old woman?" inquired Mart of the old man; the latter standing, eyes and mouth wide open in wonderment, and just beginning to comprehend the nature of the burdens that had been brought in.

"Ther ole 'oman an' me bunks up 'bove, ter keep 't'her room fer Abe when he draps in. She'll be down ther ladder speedy, now't she hears thet young'n squall; fer she hain't hear ther like o' thet, I reckon, since Abe war a sucker. Hyer she air, jist a-boomin'!"

A figure, made up of red petticoat, tangled gray hair, and lank bony arms, now presented itself, backing down the ladder at terrific speed; and a shrill voice came from it, as the old woman caught a view of the occupants of the room.

"What in ther d—I yer gut thar, Cap'n Max? Dog-gone ef ther yells o' thet babby hain't sot my brain a-whirl!"

"Hev yer brung'd it fer ole Aunt Sal? Ef yer hes, I'm ormighty 'bleeged, fer hit's nighly hell ter stay cooped up hyer wi' ther ole man's yelp allers a-torturin' yer years, an' nary 'nother human's chin music ter come in, 'ceptin' my own! Afore Abe levanted, I c'd git erlong, but I'm lonesome es kin be, since my boy jined yer. How's Abe? Air he wi' yer?"

"Too many questions at once, Aunt Sally," said Mart.

"No; Abe is at the cave—but, to business. Open the door into the other room. I want to get this burden off my hands, and the baby wants attending to."

"Work lively, both of you, and I'll explain matters soon. Uncle Mose, shake up some breakfast. We'll attend to our nags when we are free from this woman and child."

"Don't ask any more questions, either of you, for we're tired."

The log cabin consisted of two large rooms below, and was strong as a fortress, having loop-holes on all sides.

The old woman now opened the door into the adjoining room.

Mart placed Mrs. Florence upon a couch of skins, and Rand handed the babe to Aunt Sally, whose hag-like face softened into actual tenderness as she gazed upon the angelic beauty of the little one, whose eyes now looked pleadingly into her own.

As the two men left the cabin to attend to their horses, the old woman yelled:

"Yeou, Mose Mitchell, hump yerself, an' ketch a goat ormighty speedy, fer this hyer babby air nigh onter starvin'! Squeeze some milk inter a tin cup, an' then pour hit inter a bottle er somethin'!"

The old man hobbled out the back door, seemingly afraid to disobey his better-half, much more than he feared the anger of Mart and Rand for neglecting their breakfast.

A goat was soon caught and milked, and to the great gratification of Aunt Sally, the babe was fed. From the evident pleasure that the old woman manifested at having the child, Mart and Rand decided, as they staked their horses, that it would be a good idea to leave the little one, for the time being, at the cabin, until some other arrangements could be made to convey it to some place that would be safer, because more distant.

To accomplish this, however, Abe Mitchell

must be heavily bribed, and his services secured as well as those of his parents.

Mart now began to feel greatly relieved, for he felt that, having money in abundance, he could count upon the Mitchell family.

The pair now seated themselves at some distance from the cabin, to confer in regard to the situation of affairs. A new idea struck Mart suddenly, and one which promised to favor them in the removal of Mrs. Florence, without allowing the latter to betray the character and object of her abductors. This, he now proceeded to explain to his pard.

"Rand," said he, "let me tell you what I propose. If we can get the old man, Aunt Sally, and the child away from the cabin for awhile—for that matter, if you could go with them, telling them that I have some business to arrange with the woman I have brought here—then I will give the fair Rosabelle a dose that will revive her, and I can then explain to her the situation."

"I will tell her that a pard of mine is on ahead with her child, and if she will go quietly, and without making any disturbance, she will regain her infant; if not, she will never see it again."

"What do you think of my plan?"

"It is about the only way in which you can manage to get through the country with her in any shape, according to my way of thinking," said Rand; "and it's lucky you thought of it. It never would have occurred to me, I'm certain."

"There'll be a great hue and cry, as soon as the waters fall, and the bodies of this woman and her child remain unaccounted for. Old Ambrose Asbland will spend his thousands in search of his daughter and granddaughter, dead or alive."

"Quite so; but they would never trace the child to this lone cabin, and I will take the mother a long distance, and place her in safe keeping."

"I never lose sight of my revenge, and she shall feel my power. Rosa Florence shall curse the day she first saw the light, before I am through with her."

"New plans will open as time passes, and when I have her and the child safe, you and I can enjoy their wealth in any way that we see fit. Never, in all my wildest dreams of revenge, have I thought of such success as this!"

"The woman who scorned and insulted me is in my power, and I can revel in the wealth that belonged to her and the man who sneered at, and struck; besides adding to such wrongs and insults, by marrying the one woman I ever loved."

"But, speaking of your plans, how long do you propose stopping here? Some of the band might run in on us, you know, and necessitate, perhaps, a fight for our lives."

"Just so, Rand; we can't afford to hang out very long. But we'll get our breakfasts, and then you can prevail on the old couple to take you out to the bluff to get a view toward the north, and ascertain while you are there if any of the boys are coming."

"Delay them for awhile, and I'll work my plan with my victim. See if I don't deceive her into traveling discreetly."

"All right, Mart; but I'll own up that I don't relish this kind of business."

"Very possibly; but you forget the wealth that the job has brought in. As long as you are to pard with me in the ducats, don't kick against my revenge."

Re-entering the cabin, the two worthies found that the babe lay soundly sleeping upon a bearskin in one corner of the apartment; while both the old man and his wife were busily engaged in preparing breakfast, the latter constantly casting glances of tender solicitude upon the sleeping infant.

Mart Maxwell now told his story, in as few words as possible; pretending that the woman and child were near relations of his own, and that their home had been swept away by the flood on the Missouri.

He then asked Aunt Sally if she would care for the babe until the mother recovered from the shock she had received, having witnessed the drowning of her husband, and that he would pay liberally for the care and attention she bestowed upon it.

He also requested her to give Abe, on the return of the latter, five hundred dollars to keep the visit a secret; and to hold himself in readiness to bring the child to some point which he would designate by letter, should he be unable to come for the infant himself.

Very willingly did the old couple agree to this.

After breakfast, on Rand's solicitation, they accompanied the latter to the bluff, taking the babe with them; Mart declaring that the condition of the mother was such as to make it important that her child should not be seen or heard by her.

Once alone with his victim, Mart Maxwell proceeded to administer a strong dose of brandy, into which he poured some liquid from a vial which he carried in a side pocket. He then left the apartment, securing the door, and stationed himself at a window, where he could

enjoy the waking anguish of the unhappy woman. He had not long to wait.

Mrs. Florence soon sprung to a sitting posture, and with her palms pressed to her throbbing temples, seemed slowly returning to consciousness.

All at once, with a loud cry, she sprung to the floor of the cabin, and gazed wildly around the rude apartment, her eyes filled with amazement and terror.

For the moment, Mart Maxwell lost sight of the object he had in view; all his vile, fiendish nature being filled with an insane thirst for revenge—a desire to torture the soul of his helpless victim, already so deeply wronged and bereaved.

The scenes in the grounds of her father came freshly before him, when he had avowed his mad passion, and endured her scorn and contempt.

Goaded to fury as he recalled it, he now gave a bitter, mocking laugh, in perfect keeping with the expression of his face, as he gazed in upon the suffering victim of his insane hatred.

Rosa Florence gave one look at the barred window, and recognized the repulsive face which she had hoped and prayed she might never look upon again. Then she sprung across the room, leaning as far as possible from the window, her now enfeebled mind seeing untold horrors in the apparition thus presented to her waking senses.

Thus, for a moment, those two long-parted, and detesting each other as strongly as it lay in human power to do, gazed at each other.

The injured wife and mother was the first to speak.

"Mart Maxwell," she cried; "for the love of God, and as you hope for mercy, answer me truly!"

"Answer me, if there is a fraction of a man in you! I remember that you once swore vengeance upon me and mine. Is this, then, your work?"

"Where are my husband and my child? Where am I, and why have you brought me here! Oh, God, in mercy pity me! Why have you brought me here?"

"Ha! ha!" laughed the fiend at the window; "I will tell you, Rosabelle. It is sweet revenge, only to tell it. Your husband is in the cold embrace of the Mad Missouri, and the colder embrace of death."

With one wild cry, the agonized woman tottered toward the wretch who stood gloating over her anguish.

"And," continued the fiend in human shape, "your babe is in my power, as well as yourself. Your home and husband have been swallowed up, but the flood has left you and your child to me."

"Hear me, Rosabelle Florence; the man whom you scorned and loathed, who worshiped, but who now detests you, swears that he will make your life a curse to you. Your angel babe shall be reared under my pious direction."

"Ha! ha! you thought that I had forgotten my oath; that I was powerless to harm you, or yours."

"I swore to be revenged upon you and Frank Florence, and my vengeance has begun fairly to work. Look at your old lover, Rosa, and listen to me!"

"I stabbed your husband to the heart, and hurled him into the seething waters, when he was frantic at the sight of his home disappearing in their depths. I am Frank Florence's murderer. Ha! ha! ha!"

One piercing shriek of horror and despair burst from the poor woman, as she fell prone upon the log floor of the cabin.

When, at length, she regained consciousness, there was no more need of drugs.

Rosa Florence was a listless victim of insanity; holding her arms, as if caressing her child, and singing to it low lullabys.

There was but one thing for Mart Maxwell, the Miscreant of Missouri, to do; and he did it.

Representing his hapless victim as an insane sister of his own, he removed her from the lone cabin and incarcerated her in an asylum for lunatics.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FLOWER OF THE FLOOD.

THE reader must imagine seventeen long years to have come and gone, since the events we have last recorded.

We would introduce now, a young man and a maiden, who are walking arm in arm, near the bank of Red River, a short distance above Shreveport, Louisiana.

Upon a little eminence, not far to the south, stood quite a large building, with tall pillars in its front, and surrounded by extensive gardens, interspersed with drives and walks, and shaded by large and well kept trees. From the numbers of young ladies, who were to be seen promenading in its vicinity, it was evidently an establishment devoted to their culture and training.

The couple, to whom we have just referred, were models of manly and maidenly grace and beauty.

Considerably taller than his companion, with

a form that was well developed and that spoke of strength and agility, his hair dark brown and wavy, his eyes hazel, and the glow of health upon his cheek, the youth was one who could not fail to attract attention.

A faint mustache ornamented his upper lip, and relieved the otherwise somewhat feminine appearance of his face. There was an unmistakable intelligence in his glance—a look which showed him to be above the common herd.

His apparel, while it did not indicate wealth, was faultless in cut and neatness.

The maiden was slight in form, a fairy-like, angelic being, with long, wavy golden hair, which hung in rich abundance, unconfined except by a loosely-tied blue ribbon. Her eyes were of a deep cerulean blue, her teeth were pearly and even, showing with every smile, while her cheeks were tinged to correspond with the small and delicately chiseled coral lips.

She, too, was plainly, though neatly and tastefully attired, and her movements were grace itself.

The manner of the youthful pair was that of those who loved most truly and devotedly, and yet a close observer might have detected that neither of them was free from trouble.

"Flora Floyd," said the young man, in a perplexed tone, "I must say that you are an enigma, or at least that your life and the circumstances surrounding it make you such."

"I tell you now, as I have before, that I do not believe that man to be any relation of yours whatever. I am satisfied, moreover, that he is a heartless and plotting villain, who has some mercenary or revengeful purpose in view connected with you."

"I have told you many times, Will," the young girl replied, "that I have always distrusted him. More than that, I feel a sickening aversion whenever I am in his presence; but, you know, I owe everything to him. I have never known any other friend, or guardian, or whatever you may call it. He has supported and educated me, and to whom else am I to look, in the future, as in the past?"

"I do not agree with you there, my darling. I, Will Washburne, intend to interest myself in your welfare; and I shall see that you are placed in a position where you will not require a guardian of that kind or in any way."

"Flora, you have promised to be my wife. We may as well unite our fates one time as another. I am poor, it is true, and you are dependent upon that mysterious individual. If my good uncle should choose to make a will in my favor, I may some day be well off in this world's goods; but, even as it is, I am ready and willing to support you and myself until our ship comes in."

"As I have often said before, Will, I must know more about myself than I now do before I link my life with you or with any one."

"It may prove that my origin is such as to make me unworthy of you; and who knows what this mysterious man may say and do in regard to me, should he become infuriated at my casting off his protection?"

"You do not, you cannot realize the anxiety and longing that I have to know more in regard to the secret of my birth—to know even who and what my mother was!"

As the young girl uttered the last words she became violently agitated.

"Flora," entreated her companion, "do not thus distress yourself. It pains me more than I can express. Let us reason upon the situation."

"I have been thinking for some time upon what you told me when we last talked together, and I came this evening to propose a plan for your consideration. Let us take a retrospect of your life."

"You have no recollection of any relative, or of any one who ever manifested more than common friendship for you, excepting always, my humble self."

"Not this alone, but you have been moved by this mysterious guardian from place to place since childhood, which has prevented you from forming anything of the nature of lasting friendships."

"Is not this suspicious in itself? I think so, for my part; and I will now refer to the letter which you received from 'The Mystery,' as we will call him."

"It is evident from the chirography that the man was under the influence of liquor when he wrote it; and also, from the fact that in it he addressed you as Flora Florence. I am fully persuaded that is your real name. It was undoubtedly a slip of the pen, his mind, in his drunken state, being ruled by thoughts of the buried past."

"Now, you tell me that you have received another epistle, ordering you to be in readiness to leave the seminary within one month."

"This letter was written in Vicksburg, and it has a postscript stating that the writer will send you by express all the clothing and other requisites from New Orleans. Now, Flora, I am getting desperate. The fact that this man intends to remove you to some place which he does not mention, nerves me to immediate action."

"I believe that this self termed uncle and guardian stole you from your parents when you

were an infant, from revengeful or mercenary motives, and more than that, I believe your father's name to have been Florence."

"Oh, Will! I beg of you do not try to awaken hopes that will probably never be realized. I do not allow myself to think on the subject. Let the future work out the secret, whatever it may be."

"Nothing would probably ever come of it, Flora, if we went on that plan. You would be torn from me by this cunning villain, as I believe him to be, and Heaven alone knows what would be your fate."

"I cannot see how we are to prevent it," was the reply; "but I could write you, Will, if I should be in any danger from him."

"Depend upon it, Flora, your letters would never reach me. The man is a practiced villain. Let him once form a suspicion that you have formed an attachment here and he will prevent you from communicating with me."

"I see nothing but danger for you after you are beyond my protection, but I do not propose that you shall be taken from me."

"May I ask, Will, how you think of preventing it? Whoever or whatever my guardian may be, he is all-powerful."

"I tell you, Flora, I believe that the wealth upon which he flourishes belongs rightfully to you. But I am determined to solve the mystery. I am going to start out as an amateur detective."

"I shall take the next boat for New Orleans, which leaves our landing to-morrow morning at nine o'clock."

Flora Floyd caught the arm of her lover, and looked at the young man in amazement.

She was answered with a smile, but it was accompanied by a look of determination.

"Oh, Will," she cried, "you do not mean it! You are only joking."

"I never was more in earnest in my life," was the reply. "I shall do as I say. In fact, I had made up my mind in regard to it when you told me of the contents of that letter."

"I will trace this mystery out. I will find out something definite in regard to the real character of the man, or about your real history and parentage."

"But, Will, if he be what you suspect, are you not placing yourself in great danger in thus attempting to follow him up?"

"Possibly. But I am not made of the material to stand quietly and allow any one to murder me. Have no fears, Flora; I am able to take care of myself and you also, and what is more, I propose to do it. The crisis has come."

"I will write you frequently, and no one among my associates is to know where I have gone."

"Don't leave me, Will! I'm afraid something dreadful will happen to you, and then I shall indeed be alone in the world. Nothing good can come of this step on your part."

"Wait until he comes for me, and then I will demand an explanation in your presence. Please, Will, do as I suggest. I shall be so wretched while you are gone; so tortured with suspense."

"Better grieve for a week than for life, Flora. There is no use in trying to change me in this. I am fully decided. The worry must end."

"Bear in mind, darling, that the happiness of our whole lives may depend upon this journey of mine. Only remember that I go prepared to defend myself, if need be. You must plunge deeper into your studies, and try not to dwell upon anything except that which leads to pleasant thoughts, until you see me again. I am almost ready to wager my life that you will rejoice then that I did go."

In darkest apprehension, Flora clung to the young man's arm, as though she was never again to see him. It was little wonder; for the only ties she had formed through life had been thus rudely severed.

But, with tender, loving caresses, clinging embraces, and passionate kisses, they parted beneath the shades of timber on the river bank, just as the god of day sunk below the horizon—she to his to her chamber to weep, and he to prepare for his journey.

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE ALERT.

ABOUT one week after the interview between Flora Floyd and Will Washburne, the two partners in crime, Mart Maxwell and Rand Rogers, met in the rear apartment adjoining a barroom not far from Jackson Square, in New Orleans.

They had grown older and more villainous in appearance since we last saw them. Dissipation, debauchery, and crime had become stamped upon their brutal faces, and their clothing and general appearance showed them to be short of funds.

"We meet again at last, Rand, old pard," Mart was saying, "and I have much to tell you. Are you sure our conversation will not be overheard?"

"Fire away, Mart! This room is as secret as the grave. But, first let us take a stiff glass of brandy. My nerves are shaky, old boy, as well as your own. Hanged if it ain't rough to

come out of the narrow cell of a prison and be thrown upon the world without a dollar!

"But it has been a streak of luck to run against you at the start, so I won't complain. I had made up my mind to start up the river in search of you this very day, although I should have gone as a stowaway if I had."

"By Jove, Rand, I'm heartily rejoiced to come up with you! I was afraid you'd skip the city before I reached here, detained as I was at Vicksburg. I knew the very day your term was up, and I have come a long distance to put you on your legs again."

"Rand, old pard, we hold the cards to win a big pot yet, and when I explain everything to you, I know you'll admit that the woman and child were well worth carrying away from our cave on the Missouri, though they did give us no little trouble. But I looked ahead—I always do."

"I had something in view besides my revenge and that was the securing of a fortune, equally as large as the one you and I have squandered."

"You thought it was money thrown away to support them; but I knew it would prove a first-class investment, and I'll prove it to you. But, what the mischief induced you to forge those bonds. I told you the pipers were worthless, and it would get you into limbo."

"I paid pretty dear for those few scratches, I tell you, Mart. You see, I was dead broke, and had been on a protracted spree. And, let me tell you just here, I'd blow out my brains before going back into that or any other prison."

"We must get back into the wilderness further than we were before, for we're pretty well known to the detectives. I have been like one in a dream ever since we left Missouri."

"I was glad to get clear of that woman after you had that interesting interview with her and gave yourself away so completely. She was as crazy as a loon. No need of any drugs after that. But it makes me shudder when I think of her, hanged if it doesn't!"

"Mart, I don't believe you ever did love that woman, or you wouldn't have carried your revenge that far. Pass the brandy!"

Maxwell did not seem to have been paying attention to the remarks of his pard; but, after he swallowed his brandy, he spoke quickly:

"Rand, that woman has changed entirely. I have been to the asylum in disguise. She is now quiet, and never speaks to the attendants even; but paces back and forth continually, and shows symptoms of returning reason."

"She is in the same institution, is she?"

"She is; and I have forwarded funds all along to pay her bills, and this has caused her to receive more attention than most patients."

"There is no satisfaction in causing discomfort or misery to an insane person, you know, Rand. That would be simply ridiculous."

"Well, you surprise me! I never dreamed you would be so considerate. But tell me about this second fortune that you have hinted at. I'm not very squeamish, after what I have gone through, in the way of obtaining it. How many men have to be killed, and how many women and children sacrificed, before we can touch it?"

"I'm not over scrupulous just at present, but I must lie low while I'm in the Crescent City."

"I'm wanted; so I must strike toward the Southwest as soon as I am in funds."

"We happen to be in the same box, as far as that goes, Rand; but you have the advantage of me one way. You are not known in the vicinity of St. Louis; and on that fact depends our success in the future."

"Say, Rand, you must marry Flora Florence; although it is a great sacrifice on my part to allow you to do so."

"You don't mean that woman's child—the baby? Good gracious! You certainly never had any idea of marrying her yourself?"

"Such was my intention until recently. But policy, in fact, necessity, compels me to abandon my sworn resolve to that effect."

"Mart Maxwell, you are an incarnate devil!"

"Thanks for the compliment! But all this is nonsense. You know that I placed the infant in the hands of an old woman in Arkansas, who resided far from any settlement. From that, I sent her to a boarding-school at an early age, changing her about from one place to another, to insure her against making lasting acquaintances; as well as from being traced, if any should be on her track. All this, however, I have told you previously."

"She is now a very beautiful and highly accomplished young lady. She is nearly eighteen, and looks upon me as her guardian. Had I not meant her for my wife, I should have caused her to suppose me to be her father."

"You remember we saw an account in the St. Louis papers of the finding of Colonel Florence's body in the river, and the intense excitement it produced when it was seen that he had been murdered."

"The house having been swept away by the flood, it was generally supposed that Mrs. Florence and her babe had perished, although it was thought strange that their bodies were not found."

"As a matter of course, the nearest relatives claimed the plantation, but one-half of it was

mortgaged to the father of Rosa, and he had given her a dowry of one hundred thousand dollars. This, as you know, we enjoyed pretty well while it lasted."

"The half of the real estate covered by the mortgage was bought in at a forced sale by old Ashland himself, the remainder going to a brother of Frank Florence, who is a captain of cavalry, and now stationed at Fort Davis, Texas."

"His name is Captain Forrest Florence, and he has spent a pile in search of the wife and child of his brother. I tell you, Rand, if he should get us into his clutches, he'd give us short shrift, and small blame to him."

"Lately, however, I conceived the idea of giving the father of Rosa information sufficient to cause him to make a will in which they should be included, in case they should ever be discovered—the plantation being kept intact for their benefit. In proof of my information, I forwarded to old Ashland a lot of papers which were useless to us, but of value to the Ashland family. I also sent one of the gold shoulder-pins that held the child's clothes in place. It was a valuable affair, inlaid with diamonds and engraved with the name, Flora Florence, and the legend, 'Presented by her grandfather, Ambrose Ashland.'

"In my letter I stated that the mother and child yet lived, and were safe, but that, from motives of revenge, they would be prevented from returning to their home until such time as the writer chose. This had the desired effect."

"Advertisements appeared in all the principal papers of the country, offering great rewards for any definite information in regard to them."

"I knew well that the old cuss laid the abduction at my door, for he knew all about my love for Rosa, her treatment of me, and the vow of vengeance that I had taken. For this reason it would be madness for me to venture again into that section of the country; and so, as you see, I am obliged to give up my plan of marrying Flora, as, when she does return, her husband must go with her."

"To keep the old man firm in his intentions, I shall send Rosa back to him, insane though she be; I can then run the risk, should I want her again, of drawing her to any point, by causing her to believe that she will there meet her daughter."

"The child—or the young lady I should say—has a peculiar birth-mark on her left shoulder, and I have the clothing and jewelry that she wore when she was captured."

"Rand, as I said, you must marry Flora, return to the Missouri, get the estate and money into your hands, and then share them with me."

"By heavens, Mart, you are a master plotter! But haven't you over-estimated my abilities? Do you suppose that I can carry it out?"

"Just as easy as rolling off a log!"

"Of course, Mart, I am rejoiced at the pleasing prospect you have mapped out; but we need money, for the time being. I am aware that I do not present the most attractive appearance just now; and I should hesitate to meet my prospective wife, unless I was fixed up in every way tolerably ship-shape."

"But there is another very important thing that you seem to have overlooked. The girl may not wish to marry in the abstract, and she may in addition object to your humble servant in the concrete. She may have a lover already for aught you and I know."

Mart Maxwell listened with an unconcerned smile, until the last sentence was spoken. Then he started, with a scowl of impatient apprehension on his face, as he said:

"Rand Rogers, I thought I had fully digested the subject; but hanged if you haven't brought forward a point that had not occurred to me. Two heads, I see, are better than one. Flora may, indeed, have a lover; and, in that event, we might be troubled somewhat."

"However, I imagine that things will work as I have planned. As to funds, I have not been such a fool as to give myself no foundation to work upon, at so important a time as this. Although I am in a seedy condition, it is more a disguise than from necessity."

"As to the girl's being willing to marry you, it doesn't matter much one way or the other. We will use force, or drugs, if necessary. Some fine work may have to be done in order to deceive a clergyman; for the business must be such as will hold in law."

"Once let the girl find that she is your lawful wife, and she will have no alternative but to accept the situation. Then you can easily play your game. Pretend that you have come across an old newspaper, after your marriage, and intimate that the Ashland advertisement may have reference to herself."

"Let me see. I must begin by introducing you as an old friend; and, as a matter of course, it will be understood that when you do marry her, you believe her to be a portionless orphan, who has been reared by my kindness and charity."

"In this way you will have the advantage, for I will put you in funds, and you will be able to show up in a style to prove yourself a

man of wealth. Of course, you can always give me as reference."

"In this way, no sordid motives can be attributed to you, for seeking a union with her; and when she is really satisfied that her relatives and home have been discovered, she will be wild to join her mother."

"Then, the discovery having been made through your exertions, she will be overpowered with gratitude, which at length will merge into love. Her people, too, cannot do less than treat you with every kindness and respect, as having been the means of restoring their darling Flora to them."

"What say you to the scheme, as I put it? Don't you think the job an easy enough one to engineer, without the least danger to yourself—I being a worker meanwhile, but behind the scenes?"

"It certainly does appear practicable; and the future has a bright glow to it, I must confess. At any rate, I am not only willing, but eager, to take the first step."

"Mart, you ought to have been a railroad president, or revolutionary leader; for you have the brains and forethought to carry out, as well as to plan great things."

"Pass the brandy! I declare, I begin to feel already quite indifferent to the world and the future, as far as pecuniary affairs are concerned, by the mere unfolding of those plans of yours. We are pards once more; and, when we get the next fortune, I promise you I shall be more prudent."

"We can then afford to shake the dust of the States from our boots, and start a big hacienda in Mexico. But, say—when do you propose sending Mrs. Florence home, and in what manner?"

"I shall visit the asylum in disguise, but taking with me letters proving my identity, as the person who has paid for the care of my insane sister. I shall then pay one of my well-known tools to take charge of her as far as Hermann, Missouri; and there, to deliver her over to her father."

"It is now dark, however. We will go to my hotel—a retired one, as you must have concluded—and there we can change our appearance before proceeding further."

"Lead on, old pard; I'm at your heels."

With their slouched hats drawn down over their eyes, the twain rung a bell, and at the entrance of a servant, paid their bill. They then glided out into the dark street in the rear of the building, and stole away in the direction of the French market.

Had the villainous pair passed quickly out, when they first arose from the table, they would have discovered a man standing close against the rear wall of the house, his ear being placed against the brick-work, at a hole where, at one time, a water-pipe had been run into the bar. The man had listened with mingled joy, horror, and apprehension, at the revelations which he overheard.

It was none other than Will Washburne, the lover of Flora Floyd, he having arrived in New Orleans and soon after discovered Mart Maxwell. The young man had followed the latter to the bar, and then sought a place in the rear of the building, where, luckily, he overheard the conversation and thus solved the mystery that enshrouded the fair object of his affections.

Horried as Will was at the outrageous plans of the two conspirators, he was barely able to control himself sufficiently to escape into a side alley, as the ruffians passed from the back-door into the darkness and disappeared.

So overpowered was he by what he had heard that he could not immediately follow them.

He then reasoned that, as they were about to disguise themselves, it would be a loss of time to seek them, and to ask aid of the police would do him also. In that way the dastards would get ahead of him, and tear Flora from him forever.

He had heard sufficient to convince him that the worst was to be feared, and that the only thing in his power was prompt action.

He must return by the first boat and convey Flora Floyd, without delay, to a place of safety.

CHAPTER VIII.

PREPARING FOR FLIGHT.

ALTHOUGH greatly relieved at having found out, beyond any doubt as far as his own mind was concerned, the history of Flora Floyd from the conversation of the two conspirators which he had overheard, Will Washburne's brain was in a continual whirl as he paced the deck of the steamer on his return from New Orleans.

There was little satisfaction to him in the discovery that Flora was an heiress; quite the contrary indeed, for it seemed to remove her far beyond his hopes.

But the satisfaction lay in his being able to inform her of the fact that she was not of obscure or dishonorable parentage, and that there were those who loved and longed for her.

Not a solitary doubt entered his mind that she was the long-lost Flora Florence. The inadvertent mention of that name in the last let-

ter the young girl had received, joined to what Will had just learned, put the matter forever beyond peradventure.

But there were many things now to be considered.

In the first place, the mother of Flora, it seemed, was, and had been for seventeen years past, an inmate of an insane asylum. She must now be the first thought of her daughter; but it was a relief to the young man when he recalled that the villain, Mart Maxwell, had declared the intention of sending the poor woman to her father, should the latter be yet alive.

There, too, did Will resolve to fly with Flora.

It would probably be a dangerous undertaking, for when the ruffians should discover the girl's flight from the seminary, they would naturally conclude that in some way she had obtained knowledge of her friends and they would in every way try to effect her recapture.

Decidedly it would not be prudent to acquaint Flora with the whole facts of her history, especially so far as it related to her unfortunate mother; as in that case, she would doubtless insist on seeking her parent, and thus fall readily again into the clutches of Mart Maxwell.

Only one way remained. They must seek the protection of Flora's uncle, at Fort Davis. There she would be safe, and beyond the power of those who sought her ruin.

As far as Marshall, Texas, some thirty miles from Shreveport, they could travel by stage; thence they would be obliged to go by horseback to Fort Belknap, some two hundred miles further, where they could take one of the St. Louis and Santa Fe coaches, and cross to Fort Davis, via Fort Chadbourne, Phantom Hill, Fort Concho, and Horse Head Crossing.

The journey would be a long and wearisome one; but it must be taken, for it was the only course that promised protection to the darling of Will Washburne's heart.

Not being well posted as to the nature of the country through which he proposed to travel, the dangers of the journey were not realized by the young man. Before retiring to his state-room, he had fully resolved upon his plan of action, but, though he strove to calm his mind in sleep, the knowledge he had gained excited him to such an extent, that rest was out of the question.

More than once he was troubled by the thought that those whom he feared so much might be on the boat in disguise; but eventually he reached Shreveport, and hastened to the place of his last meeting with Flora. Meeting a young colored lad, he dispatched him in haste, with a letter to the maiden, informing her of his arrival, and asking that he might see her immediately.

Soon, to the relief and joy of the young man, he saw Flora advancing through the scattered timber from the seminary, with hasty step. He waved his hat, and then retired into the thicket, wishing to avoid being noticed.

With flushed face, and eager, joyous manner, the young girl met him, crying out:

"Oh, Will! Dear Will, I am so rejoiced to see you safe back. I have been so anxious on your account."

The youth clasped his darling to his heart, as he said:

"Dear little Flora! I begged of you not to worry, but it seems you disregarded my wishes. But we have no time for words. Flora Florence, you must prepare for immediate flight. You are in great danger."

"What do you mean, Will?" she demanded, in astonishment. "And why do you call me Flora Florence? But, I recollect now—tell me! Your mission must have been successful in some way. Have you gained intelligence of my parents? Speak, for mercy's sake!"

The agitation and pleadings of the maiden affected Will Washburne greatly; but he hesitated for a moment, knowing well that the news he had gained would not call for the extreme feelings manifested by her.

But the tale must be told, and at once. So he threw off the depression, caused by thoughts connected with it, and began the recital. Doubly painful it was to him, for he feared it must result in his having to relinquish all claims to her affection and her hand.

"Flora Florence," he began, "for such is indeed your name, as for some time I have believed, I have succeeded in my mission, beyond my expectations."

"Fortune favored me from the first. I walked the streets of the Crescent City, and watched every boat that landed passengers on the levee, eventually discovering him whom you have called your guardian."

"I followed him like a sleuth-hound, and at last gained a position where I could overhear every word that was spoken by him and a boon companion; who, by the way, is but just out of prison."

"He is, as I have always felt, a black-hearted miscreant, and a cowardly murderer!"

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed the young girl.

Will heeded her not, but continued:

"I dare not tell you, Flora, how depraved a villain he is. It is enough that I heard a plot, in connection with yourself, that nearly drove me into the wretch's presence then and there, that

I might shoot the two scoundrels in their tracks."

"Flora, darling, this man stole you from your mother's arms. Your father is dead. Your mother's present whereabouts is unknown to me. You are an heiress, and it is your fortune that these two infamous plotters are now seeking to secure."

"This guardian of yours is called by his comrade, Mart Maxwell. He had, so he declared, originally an intention of making you his wife. As the carrying out of this project is attended with some danger to him, he has relinquished it in favor of this hopeful friend of his. It is now decided that you are to wed this Rand Rogers."

"They seem uncertain as to whether your grandfather, who has long sought you, is yet alive; but you have an uncle, Captain Forrest Florence, an officer in the regular army, and now at Fort Davis. It is to him that we must go."

"These wretches intend to drug you, or in some such way, force you into a marriage with Rogers, and then the fortune, which is yours from your grandfather, is to be shared between them."

"Oh, Father in Heaven, what shall I do? Oh, Will, darling, how am I to escape from them? Thank God, that I at last know the secret of my parentage, but it only aggravates my situation, when the terrible fate with which the future threatens me is considered."

"But I cannot comprehend what you tell me. It is too terribly unjust to think of. What am I to do? Do not desert me—protect me from these fiends!"

"Calm yourself, Flora, darling; I do not think that these villains came on the boat with me; although they proposed to adopt disguises, and they are adepts at the business. Very probably they cannot reach here for two or three days. They seemed to be drinking heavily, and will not be likely to leave New Orleans immediately. Should they come, however, I will shoot them dead in their tracks before they can lay a hand upon you."

"I shall not leave you again until you are safe under the protection of your uncle. I have planned everything on my way up river. It will not be safe to start in search of your grandfather, and we do not know where your mother is. All I have learned is, that she has been in the power of the miscreant who stole you from her, and happily she has never realized her sufferings."

"The wretch, Maxwell, spoke of sending Mrs. Florence back to her home, asserting that she was regaining her sanity. But we are helpless at present, so far as assisting her is concerned. That must be deferred until your uncle has been made familiar with the whole history of the crime."

"We have no alternative, but to hasten from this at once, and join Captain Florence, even if it is such a long journey."

"But, darling mine, I feel, somehow, that all this will be the means of parting you and me forever. You will be rich, and I, in all human probability, am destined to remain poor."

The young man would not have hinted at his misgivings so soon, had he not seen a sign of reluctance on the face of the maiden, to a speedy compliance with his project. It was evident that Flora's first thought was to brave all danger in search of her mother. But the last words of Will had the desired effect.

She clung to him, exclaiming, rebukingly:

"Oh, Will, have I not enough of anguish to bear, that you should inflict these doubts of me upon me? Never speak in that way again, or I shall doubt your love. Neither fortune, nor the lack of it shall ever act as a bar between us."

"I should die—I could not live without you! I have had none but you to love, for aught that I knew, until a few minutes ago."

"We will speak of our vows and our prospects some other time," said Will. "At present, we must act. There is no time to be lost. You must hasten now to your apartment, and get your trunk packed, without betraying by your excitement your intended departure; for, as Maxwell pays your bills, and holds the head of the seminary responsible for you, they would refuse to permit you to leave."

"Tell little Jim to meet me in this thicket tonight. I will have a rope-ladder, and by tossing a ball of twine into your window, you will be enabled to draw the ladder up, and secure it. I will assist you to descend, and also lower your trunk by a rope."

"My baggage will be at the Shreveport station, and my man will help Jim with yours to the same point, while we walk into town."

"The stage leaves for Marshall, early tomorrow morning, and we go on that coach, keeping on west by another line, toward Fort Belknap. We will give the fiends the slip—never fear!"

"Do my plans suit you, Flora; and will you do as I have arranged?"

"Oh, yes, Will—yes! I am terribly frightened, but I will hasten at once to prepare for the journey. I hate and abhor the place, and shall be in the most torturing apprehension until we are speeding away from it. It matters not where—anywhere, away from these monsters!"

"Be calm, Flora darling. All will yet be well, I most sincerely hope and believe. Harm shall not come to you, until I am slain by those who seek your ruin; and I do not think I am in danger of death."

"I would shoot both these scoundrels as quick as I would serpents, were we in the wilderness together; but here in civilization, a prison would be my home for life in that case, it is more than probable, should I attempt it."

"But do not linger, Flora. We meet again to-night, not to be parted for many a long day. One more kiss, and then I, too, go to make ready."

The two embraced, as only they who love each other more than all the world can do; then Flora Florence tripped toward the Seminary, striving to remove, as she went, all traces of tears, and to curb her excitement.

Will Washburne stood, gazing after her for a moment, and then hastened to his boarding-place, a farm-house near at hand, to prepare for their flight into the wilderness.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TWO SCOUTS.

"Hit 'pears es though thar war a nasty time croppin' out ahead—a reg'lar ginewine doxologer! A rumblin' rambu'st, that'll take yer eye-winkers off slick an' clean, ef yer doesn't crawl inter some sort ev a 'cache' afore she 'splodes, an' 'boots this-a-ways."

"Gee-boss-iphat! Ole pard, bit'll be a reg'lar ripstaver, er I'm a bowlin' liar!"

"Reckon ye're 'bout kerract, Old Rock; an' hit's ormighty lucky we-uns roved nigh on ther timmer, or we'd stand a show ter git h'isted an' skuted clean 'cross ther Grande, like bob-tailed tuzzards."

"Hit's goin' ter blow hard 'nough ter flip off ther ears ev a gov'ment mule; an' them dang'd anermiles kin buck ag'in' mos' anythin' 'ceptin' a ole he 'norther.' When I gits cotched on ther perrarer in one o' them, hit curls me up like a 'rattler' jist afore a jump. Howsomever, I reckon we-uns kip find a snug hole under ther bank o' Elm Fork, whar we kin lay low, kinder comfortable like, until she bu'sts up, an' simmers down."

"Hit doesn't take spur ner quirt ter make our nags pick up busts, I notice, fer they smells ther comin' change 'bout natur's breathe. 'Skip' air right peart 'bout 'ow, wi' his nose p'inted straight fer ther 'cache'."

The first speaker was mounted upon a hardy half-breed horse, that showed points for speed and endurance.

He was a man of medium size, past middle age, his fair sprinkled with gray, his face somewhat wrinkled, and he was dressed entirely in buckskin, much torn and soiled.

A remnant only of his Mexican *jaqueta* covered partially his blue woolen shirt. His fringed leggings were thrust into his cow-hide boots, and a black slouched sombrero, much the worse for camp-life, jammed carelessly on the back of his head, displayed a well-developed brow, beneath which gleamed a pair of sharp, bright eyes, that rolled continuously, darting far-reaching glances upon every side. A Sharp's carbine was held to the horn of his saddle by a strap, while a pair of Colt's revolvers and a huge bowie-knife were belted around his waist.

The name of this personage was William Young; but he was known to but few by any other cognomen than that of "Old Rocky," which he had acquired by having passed much of his eventful life, as a ranger and scout, in the Rocky Mountains.

His companion was more slightly built, and habited and armed in much the same manner; but the horse he rode was lank and lean like himself, and like him, too, had the peculiarity of being blind in one eye.

Like his comrade, this man was a noted character in the great Southwest, and was known as "Single-Eye," this being the only name he ever laid claim to.

His hair, like that of Old Rocky, was long and straight, and thickly mingled with gray, but his face was thinner and more wrinkled, and there was as much vim and fire expressed in his solitary optic as is commonly displayed in the full complement of eyes in a younger and more vigorous man.

The general appearance of these two scouts proved them to be well used to prairie wanderings; and, from the fact that their girths, bridles, and lariats were all spun from buffalo-hair, any one acquainted with border life would at once decide that they had been long on the range where any equipments of leather or rawhide would be gnawed at night by the prowling coyotes.

They are now approaching Elm Fork, a branch of the South Fork of the Brazos, and coming in a northerly direction. In fact, they are headed for a bend in the first-mentioned stream, not far from Fort Phantom Hill.

When once they should have passed the timber, forded the creek, and reached the south-

eastern border of the belt of trees, this military station would be within view, and only five miles distant across the plain.

Through this station ran the old St. Louis and Santa Fe stage road.

Herds of deer and antelope were now speeding toward the timber of Elm Fork, straining their muscles to the utmost to gain cover, while birds in myriads fluttered with chirp and whistle of fright to the same refuge from the coming wind and tempest.

With the exception of these, the vast plain was silent as death. The declining sun was darting his bright rays from a cloudless sky. But the scouts well knew the signs. A "norther" was about to shoot down upon them with terrific force, and bird and beast were warning them of their danger.

These "northers," so frequent on the great plains of the Southwest, often carry death to man and brute, and bird, who, sweltering in the heat of the sun, are almost immediately overwhelmed by a fierce and frigid gale, before which they are driven, chilled to the very bone.

Further north, the "wet northers," there known as "blizzards," where the rain falls thick, and freezes as it falls, men and animals are often frozen to death.

This has occurred, even as far south as the Victoria Prairie, between the Rio Colorado and Rio Nueces, near the Gulf of Mexico.

There is no such thing as forcing a horse or a mule to face a "norther." Spur and quirt are useless in such an emergency. They will whirl about, when in harness, and stand with their hoofs braced forward, their backs humped, and their heads lowered; and when free, will dash with wild snorts and terrific speed before the gale.

The animals ridden by the two scouts now galloped in mad haste toward the friendly serpentine line of timber, neck and neck; the riders casting occasional apprehensive glances over their shoulders, as they thus sped before the coming gale.

Soon the horses sprung into the bottom, and dashed through the undergrowth toward the stream, the high banks of which promised protection.

Eagerly the panting steeds drank of the cool waters, but their riders did not allow them to linger. On they spurred, through the shallow stream and timber, beyond on its opposite bank, Old Rocky exclaimed:

"Reckon, pard, we'll kivergate things hyerabouts, an' not sinner ther bank ontill we knows what's out on ther south perrarer."

"Thet war a-workin' in my brain-box, Old Rocky," returned Single-Eye. "Thar mought be a sprinklin' o' red beathun run in onter we-uns, arter gittin' snug an' cosey; an' they'd scoop us outen ther wet slick an' clean, ef ther dang'd norther hed us twisted up, an' spilt fer lively biz."

"I'll own I ain't woth shucks when I've gut a chill ter wrastle with. We-uns kin git a peep et ther stage road, et ther edge o' ther bush. Ef thar's a coach comin', bit 'ud better be p'inted toward ther crick, er hit'll git rolled over an' over on ther perrarer, jist es likely es not, an' ther humans git shuck up consider'ble."

"Dang my cats, ef I knows what day o' ther week hit air; er what day ther ole hearse hums outen Fort Belknap. But, ef hit are dead east from ther timmer, they're cussed fools ter keep on ther Phantom Hill, even ef they hes gut ther norther ag'in' thar 'hind boot."

"I warn't a-thinkin' 'bout ther coach 't all," said Old Rocky; "though I hed a linger n' notion thar mought be a waggin-train on ther trail down country. Howsomever, hyer we air, an' we kin git a squar' gaze et ther lay-out ahead, afore blue blazes comes a-hummin' ag'in' our hinders."

At this, the horse of Old Rocky thrust its nose through the undergrowth on the edge of the bottom timber, and the next instant, the boundless plain stretching east and south as far as the eye could reach, was alive with deer and antelope, flying at terrific speed over it, toward the line of timber that concealed the two scouts, and marked the course of Elm Fork. Instinctively, both men reined up their horses to prevent them from stepping free from cover, while their faces were filled with amazement and concern.

"Jumpin' Jee-roosi-lum!" exclaimed Old Rocky.

"By ther bones o' Davy Crockitt! Dang my half-sister's black cat!" burst from the lips of Single-Eye.

So completely dumfounded were the pair of border rangers that both gazed, staring in wonder and consternation at the sight that met their view.

The scene before them was indeed such as might well cause even these old plainsmen to be affected with the emotions referred to, and that in spite of the many terrible experiences through which they had passed during so much of their eventful lives.

As they were now on the northern edge of the bend, the northeastern portion of the plain toward Fort Belknap was in full view; but they

were not able to scan the plain toward Fort Phantom Hill without going a rifle-shot further east around its outer edge, thus giving them a clear southern vista.

As has been intimated, however, there was sufficient to claim their attention north of the bend.

First came the stage from Fort Belknap, rattling over the plain at terrific speed, the six frantic horses in a break-neck gallop, and yet lashed at every bound by the horror-stricken driver. Several passengers also had their heads thrust from the windows of the coach and were grasping their rifles.

But it needed not this to guide the gaze of the two scouts. The air rung with blood curdling war-whoops, and, thundering on after the doomed stage, scarcely a quarter of a mile in the rear, came a horde of war-painted Comanches, their feathers flaunting and scalps fluttering from their lances, the points of which glittered in the golden rays of the setting sun.

On dashed the resistless savage mob; their exultant yells sounding out afar over the plain, as their horses sprung forward under the cutting of the torturing quirts.

Like an avalanche thundering over the plain, like a horde of fiends from Tophet, sowing murder and torture broadcast on their trail, on they came, toward the doomed occupants of the Concord coach.

Full three-score of these vermilion-daubed demons, their snake-like eyes glittering with their thirst for blood, their black hair flying wild, they were a sight to appall the stoutest hearts. The sounds that issued from their throats were sufficient to paralyze the nerves of the bravest, and render helpless any who were unaccustomed to such hellish whoops and yells.

And indeed they would have met with no resistance had they lunched themselves from ambush upon the stage, the occupants being dazed and utterly helpless.

As it was, they had time to recover somewhat, and to realize that they must fight for life, and with but little hope of escape from being butchered in cold blood.

Soon the foremost warriors reached a point abreast of the fast-flying coach, where they drew their bows, and fitted their arrows to the strings, still flying at full speed.

Then mingling with the terrible war-whoops, came a volley of rifle and pistol shots, followed by shrieks and howls of the dying. Up went the arms of many a painted brave in the air, as he fell over upon the plain.

The air was filled with clouds of arrows, all shot toward a common center—the coach and team—the whirling steel points glinting in the sun.

With a dozen arrows projecting from their sides, the lead horses of the stage went down. The "string" pair and "wheelers" fell over the "leaders," and the coach came to a halt. Soon it was surrounded by a ring of braves, who had up to this time been hidden from view, and their quivering feathered shafts dealt death among their helpless victims.

Not long did this harrowing scene last. The coach was soon hidden from view by the hideous mob, while from their midst came shrieks of agony and hopeless despair, drowned by whoops of victory and triumph. Then, as the sun's upper disk sunk below the plain, red flames shot up, which showed the painted demons dancing in fiendish joy around the burning stage.

However, this did not long continue. The Comanches well knew that the fire could be seen from Fort Phantom Hill, so they dashed rapidly off toward Elm Fork, aiming to strike the timber half a mile above the point at which the scouts now sat upon their horses, with grating teeth, and hands tightly clutched on their rifles, maddened at the terrible sight, but forced to remain in concealment, as to dash out, and attempt to save the occupants of the coach, would have been certain death—death by terrible torture, at the hands of these merciless pirates of the plains.

As the two scouts thus sat in silence and darkness, a dull roar reached their ears from the plain beyond the timber; this gradually increased, and was followed quickly by sounds like the shrieks of a thousand fiends.

With snorts of terror, the horses reared upward, crashing their hoofs into the undergrowth; then, with tenfold rush and roar, bending the trees double, and darting cold chills like knife-thrusts through man and beast, on came the dread "norther," carrying clouds of leaves before it over the south plain.

Springing from their horses, Old Rocky and Single-Eye grasped their bridle-reins, and jerked the animals down into the bottom, toward the shelter of the opposite bank of the stream.

Not a word escaped their lips. It would have been labor lost had they spoken; for even had they yelled at the top of their voices, the sounds would have been lost in the pandemoniac tumult of the fierce "Norther," as it howled and roared, and shrieked through the towering timber of Elm Fork, making man's rage, and fury, and fiendishness seem puny in comparison.

CHAPTER X.

CAPTURED BY THE COMANCHES.

EVERYTHING having been arranged by Will Washburne for their flight, he and Flora, the following morning, before sunrise, had taken their seats in the coach at Shreveport, the young girl sitting in front and closely veiled, while Will occupied a back seat and feigned to be asleep, as though having arrived by the down-country coach, and having traveled all the night.

Having arrived at Marshall, they secured seats on an up country line, and journeyed night and day as far as the stage went, when, fortunately, they secured accommodation in a government ambulance that was on the way to Fort Belknap. This was provisioned, and the officer for whom it had been provided very politely offered every attention in his power to Will and his fair companion.

From him, also, they ascertained that Captain Florence had recently been ordered to Fort Phantom Hill, a post much nearer to them than Fort Davis.

This information gave great joy and relief to them both, and the future began to look brighter.

The journey by ambulance was a very pleasant one, the escort, as well as Will, who had provided himself with a brace of Colt's revolvers and a five chambered carbine of the same make, being able to secure considerable game of the larger kind, such as deer, antelope and buffalo.

So delighted was young Washburne with the free air of the plains, that he quite made up his mind to adopt border life, should Flora decide to remain with her uncle, and he felt confident that he would soon learn the mysteries of prairie craft, for the very reason that the life had such attractions for him.

Had he a ranch and a small stock of cattle of his own, with Flora as his wife, he felt that he could enjoy existence to the full; indeed, the world beyond and outside could no longer tempt him.

Little did the young man dream that he was soon to experience border dangers and horrors, such as would cause him to curse the day that he decided to venture upon the frontiers, imperiling by such a course the life so much dearer to him than his own.

They reached Fort Belknap without any accident or perilous adventure, and were there forced to remain two days, waiting for the stage from the North.

Will, however, welcomed this delay on Flora's account, for she had been greatly fatigued by the continuous traveling, as well as by the excitement and the unusual manner of life. Besides this, the young girl was somewhat embarrassed by being thrown so entirely into the companionship of the opposite sex, she being the only female of the party; but she was treated with most respectful politeness and consideration by every one, each vying with the other in their efforts to add to her comfort.

Will was obliged to assume and keep up the manner and conversation of a brother, as they had decided to represent that as the relationship between them.

To their great relief, they at length found themselves seated side by side in the south-bound coach, and hastening as fast as six fine horses could speed, toward their destination. Besides themselves, there were four passengers, all men of middle age. These were returning to El Paso and Santa Fe, they having been to St. Louis for the purpose of buying goods for the border trade, and which were to be transported by wagon trains.

At four in the morning the stage set out from Fort Belknap, changing horses at mid day—the line, at that time, having stations some forty miles apart—and it was near sundown when the coach whirled toward Phantom Hill, some ten miles from the same, and the timber of Elm Fork, which empties into the Clear Fork of the Brazos river, being near at hand, and to the west of the stage road.

Wearied out, and occasionally catching brief snatches of sleep, the passengers suddenly started from their lethargy, only to be almost paralyzed with fear and horror by the frantic conduct of the driver, who now lashed the team into headlong speed, yelling meanwhile in frantic tones expressive of the greatest terror.

"Git out yer shooters, an' fight fer yer lives! Ther dang'd Curmanches air arter us! Gi'n 'em blue blazes, though we hesn't gut no show ter save our ba'r!"

Hardly had these words left the driver's lips, when the terrible war-whoop from three-score of throats fell upon the ears of the terrified passengers. Well they knew the fate that awaited them, should they be overtaken by the red fiends.

Gazing from the coach windows, as they grasped their rifles, they drew back on the instant when they perceived the horde of war-painted savages, and stared vacantly, and with horror-stricken eyes upon each other.

Clutching the arm of Will, poor Flora, speechless in her terror, fixed her eyes upon the young man's face with an expression so strange and unearthly, as to make the cup of his wretchedness complete, with the thought of the scene of horror into which he had brought

her. He had no word of comfort to speak; and, had it been otherwise, there was now no time to utter it. The fearful, vengeful yells came nearer and nearer.

With their weapons held firmly, every man felt that the hand of death was at his throat, but each was determined to sell his life as dearly as possible.

With whirr and thud, a cloud of arrows passed over and struck into the stage, some falling within the windows, and sticking quivering into the inner woodwork and lining. Will and Flora, being on the back seat, were in less danger than the other passengers.

The young man now forced his companion into a crouching position on the floor of the vehicle, while he stood over her, his rifle ready, and his revolvers handy to his grasp. Flora clasped her arms about his knees, bowing her head in prayer, fully believing that she had been doomed from her birth to injustice and wrong, which was to be ended now, only in her falling a victim to savage cruelty.

With desperate fury blazing in his eyes, Will Washburne stood half-bent over the maiden he so worshiped, a deadly determination in his face, and manifested also by his daring and fearless position.

He believed there might yet be a chance of escape.

He knew that they were near Fort Phantom Hill, and he could not but think that five rifles in ready hands, with the reserve of revolvers, would be sufficient to keep at bay even this immense horde of savages, who were armed only with their bows and arrows.

Gazing out from the window, the young man quickly drew back, as had done the others, his strong frame convulsed with a spasmodic shudder, and his eyes filled with horror at the fearful sight that met them.

It was beyond everything he had ever dreamed of, in his wildest imaginings.

Once more he gazed down upon Flora, whom he now felt to be doomed to a horrible fate, and one for which he himself was responsible. But the look of horror left his face, his muscles became rigid as steel, a desperate look flashed from his eyes, his teeth became set together, and his clutch tightened on his rifle as it flew on the instant to his shoulder.

A wild yell followed the shot, and a brave threw up his arms and rolled over upon the plains.

Another volley of arrows followed this shot of Will's, mingled with the terrible war-whoops, but the rifles of the other passengers flashed simultaneously, two of those who pulled triggers falling back with heavy and agonizing groans, pierced by the deadly feathered shafts which were half-buried in their breasts. At the same moment a heavy fall above, and the flying of the team from the road, told of the killing of the faithful driver who had bent all his attention upon his horses.

Then, with a sudden lurch forward, the coach came to a halt, and again a cloud of arrows cut the air in every direction. A ring of fast-circling Indians now galloped around the doomed conveyance, and the ears of the survivors were tortured by the deafening and exultant whoops and yells.

Once more cracked the rifles, followed by the rattle of revolvers, while arrows flew thick from every side, and the circle of painted fiends grew less and less in diameter, the braves being securely hidden upon the outer edge of their wild-eyed mustangs.

At last Will Washburne stood alone, but unharmed.

Flora Florence lay senseless at his feet.

The other passengers lay dead.

Like a panther at bay the young man stood, his rifle and revolvers empty, his bowie clutched, prepared to battle to the last to protect the helpless maiden now stretched unconscious at his feet.

But the cause was hopeless. He could face but one window at a time, and a blow on his head from behind him, with a hatchet, laid him low.

A loud whoop came from every bronzed throat as the mob of merciless savages jerked the doors of the coach open, dragged out the corpses and the living but senseless maiden and her defender.

The usual robbery and mutilation of the slain followed, and the scalps were slashed and torn from their heads.

Securing Will upon a horse from which the rider had been shot, and Flora upon another, and then cutting sufficient meat from the hams of the slain horses to supply the war-party during next camp, the Comanches hurled their dead enemies again into the coach, which they set on fire.

Then, with their own dead and wounded, and the two captives, they galloped to the timber of Elm Fork; gaining its shelter as, with a wild roar and rush, and prostrating chill, the fierce "norther" shot over the plains, bending the giant trees like willows, and tearing through the timber, shrieking like an army of tortured fiends.

The victorious Comanches secured their horses under the sheltering banks, wrapped themselves

in their blankets, and crouched here and there, in favorable positions; not a few of them believing that the Great Spirit was angry with them on account of the captured maiden.

The striking beauty of the fair girl, even in her wretchedness, had caused these untutored savages to think her a being more than human—one whom their traditions would designate as a favorite of the gods.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MORNING DAWNS.

In the shelter of a "wash-out," on the north-west bank of Elm Fork, Single-Eye and Old Rocky ensconced themselves, in the midst of the gloom and Egyptian darkness that came with the "norther."

Quickly securing their animals to the projecting roots of trees, and removing the saddles and bridles, which they placed in the most favorable position in their retreat, the two scouts loosened their blankets and seated themselves upon their saddles, wrapping the blankets about their shivering forms.

Here they prepared to "sit out" the "norther"; the proximity of the Comanches rendering it dangerous in the extreme to start a fire, even had they the fuel for the purpose. This it was impossible to collect in any quantity, owing to the intense darkness.

It was impossible to indulge in conversation, and, weary and sleepy, they leaned against the base of the overhanging bank, pulled their sombreros over their heads, and tried to make the best of their very precarious situation. This, from long experience of a like character, they had regulated themselves to do; and they were not to be swerved from prudent actions in any emergency by undue and damaging excitement, brought about by danger to themselves or others.

Thus they passed the long and terrible night.

The force and din of the "norther" abated not one iota; and, on through the following forenoon, until the sun reached the zenith, there would come a disdainful puff from the dying storm, or a darting shriek through the timber; the last expiring effort of paralyzed nature after the fierce war of elements.

Not even to crop the green twigs that drooped from the banks, did the half-famished animals make a solitary movement while the storm prevailed.

But now, as the gale died down, they showed impatient eagerness to feed, snapping viciously at the branches on every side.

"Dang my ole gran'marm's back ha'r, Ole Rock, how air yer? Shake! I swarn ter Cristy, ef I ain't 'bout broke up. I'm stiff es a wagon-tongue, an' sick es a ole hen wi' ther seven years pip. My stomick is es holler es a las' year's gourd, an' my brain box is so dang'd beflustered an' befogged wi' ther condemned double-barrel'd norther, an' ther work o' ther red bellyuns las' sundown, thet I ain't wo'th a half-smoked shuck cigarette!"

"Dang'd ef I didn't snatch a few winks between times, now and then; but I war so dog-goned mixed up, thet I hed better feel o' my head every time I snapped my peeper open, ter find out ef my scalp war in hits us'al locate."

"Skip," turning to his horse; "Skip-lively, I'm ormighty relieved, an' chuck-full o' pure glad ter see yer still a-standin' on huffs, an' waggin' tail so nat'ral like. Reckon yer orter hev a show ter t'ar grass, fer I opine we-uns hes hefty biz ahead."

As he spoke, Single-Eye threw off his blanket, and put out his hand, which his pard took, in a morning "shake;" meanwhile yawning and stretching his arms, throwing his body forward in an attempt to get upon his feet, but sinking back again with a half-groan, as he muttered:

"Dang'd ef I ain't es stiff es ef I'd bin swallerin' starch fer grub, ther las' six moons, myself!"

"I feel as though I could chaw down 'bout a dozen pa'r o' b'iled owls, er a bar'l o' hashed coyote, 'sides feelin' so blue 'bout ther gills thet I kin taste bit."

"Reckon ye're mighty right 'bout thar bein' hefty biz ahead fer we-uns. Dod gast my ole 'Merican heart, ef thet warn't a tough sight ter gaze et, las' night! An' hit war all I c'd do, ter hold tight onter a limb, ter keep from stompedin' outen ther timmer in 'mong ther red scarifyers, 'thout considerin' thet hit 'u'd be a dead sure thing on my losin' my ha'r, an' gittin' a free pass ter kingdom come."

"Pard, though yer hesn't gut but one peeper, I s'pose yer see'd thet ther bellyuns tuck two white humans from ther bearse, lariatied 'em ter nags, an' skuted up the fork wi' them?"

"Ya-as, I see'd ther hull dang'd biz clean through; but I hated most ormighty bad ter mention hit, knowin' yer felt bad enough es things hes gone wi' we-uns, an' bein's how ther 'norther' hev left us."

"We-uns must stow some grub, find a open-in' fer ther nags ter t'ar grass, an' then kinder smell 'roun' down ther drink, er watch ther condemned painted scalpers arter they break far camp; fer, ef I didn't git a gaze et a caliker-kivered human, what war bein' tuck off by ther

ha'r-t'arers, I'm ormighty badly fooled. What hes yer gut ter offer? Does yer s'pose thet ther coach burned arter ther 'norther' struck hit?"

"Nary er burn, pard! Ther wind tuck a holt on hit so suddint-like, thet hit snaked ther fire clean out. I'm dead sure o' hit. I see'd ther flicker o' caliker myself, er I'm badly bamboozled; an' I sw'ar thet ther pesky scalpers shell hear wuss nor a norther afore a week skips over 'em."

"We'll foller 'em, pard, ontill ther bad place freezes over, an' save ther 'oman; er else we'll flop over, an' make a die ev hit a-tryin'. Thar's a white man, too, in ther outfit, what warn't bored er slashed, er I'm a most cussedly mistuck pilgrim; though hit 'gun ter git so dark thet I hed a leetle differculity ter 'zamine things."

"Reckon we'll soon fine out ther hull pertic'lars, but we hes ter glide slow, an' keep kiver, ontill we knows 'bout what kind o' a lay-out we hes ter buck ag'in'."

"Does yer s'pose thet ther sojer-boyees et ther fort see'd ther red skunks et thar dev'lish work?"

"Hit's a dead sure thing thet they didn't, er thar'd 'a' bin a hefty sprinklin' o' them this-a-way by this; though yer c'u'dn't 'spect they'd make a break ter save ther stage folkses inter ther teeth o' thet norther; fer ef they did, they'd hev ter bump tharselves back a-kinin', afore they'd glided a mile toward Elm Fork."

"Dang'd ef I b'lieve they even see'd the fire, fer they must ba' bin on ther jump a-fixin' things snug, knowin' thar war a roarin', ragin' norther a-comin' on ther chain-lightnin' hum. But let's jark out a string o' dried buffler ter chaw, an' then skute toward ther bend, takin' a peep over ther plain."

"Then we kin levant up-stream, an' 'vester-gate 'bout ther red bellyuns."

"Reckon we'd better lead our critters 'long over ther drink, an' 'low them ter t'ar grass in some open, ontill we-uns skutes back."

"That's jist what's on our p'ogramme, pard," said Old Rocky. "Git, Skip, hev yer shooters handy fer speedy biz, an' come on. I smell bleed on ther air, dang'd ef I doesn't; an' I feels sorter squirmish, es I allers does, when thar's ther devil ter pay ahead, an' slim chances fer keepin' a cluss grip on yer ba'r."

Soon the two scouts had their horses ready, and leading the animals to the creek, passed through it, and on into the timber on the eastern side, where they soon found a small grass-grown "open," in the timber. There they left the horses to feed, while they continued onward to their lookout of the previous evening.

As they knew not at what moment they might be discovered by a Comanche spy, they proceeded with great caution; for it was only reasonable to suppose, that the braves, in view of the fact that a detachment of troops would probably be dispatched north in quest of the missing coach, would be ordered down-stream.

Nothing of the kind, however, was detected; and the pair crawled, side by side, through the undergrowth, to its margin, when they parted the bushes, and gazed out over the plain.

In front of them was the partially destroyed coach, the upper portions and the curtains having been burned, and the body black but not consumed.

Not a living or moving object was to be seen on the broad expanse of plain before them. The animals, that had taken refuge in the timber at the coming of the storm, still remained there, wearied out by fright and cold and privation.

Satisfied that no living being was within the wreck of the stage, the scouts proceeded across to the southern swell of the bend, and inspected the same in the direction of Phantom Hill with the same result. A casual observer would not have discovered that the slight break beyond was the low palisades and barracks of the military post.

"I w'u'dn't wonder," said Old Rocky in a low voice, "ef ther heft o' ther blue-coats war on a scout, Concho-way, arter 'Paches. Hit ain't long since Lone Wolf gin 'em a right lively time, down et Fort Mason an' 'long ther Colorado, an' ther scarifyin' cuss an' his painted bellyuns gin'rally p'int's up ther Concho when he's on ther hum-stretch."

"Hit mought be so," agreed Single-Eye; "but we-uns hain't gut no call ter linger hyer. Ef thar war a thousan' sogers down yunder, they wouldn't do nary good et this part o' ther deal; fer ther cussed Cormanches hez done ther job, an' ef they see'd ther boyees from ther fort arter 'em they'd tortur' thar captives er knife 'em et onc't, an' then git up an' dust 'cross ther buffler range, whar 'sign' doesn't talk an' 'Merican nags, sich es ther cavalry hes, 'u'd wilt afore two days' speedy travelin' on clipped feed an' dry water-holes."

"Thet's whar ye're jist korrect, ole pard! An' es we-uns hes tuck a squint this-a-ways, we'll levant up crick ter ther mo' risky biz."

"Thar warn't much call fer our comin' this side o' ther drink, but fer ter limber our j'int's up a leetle an' straighten ther kinks in our muscular systematics, es Joe Booth used ter put hit."

"An' now, pard, yer'll hev ter put yer eye on extra juty, an' crawl es slow an' easy es a

painter arter a fat buck. We-uns mought creep plum inter wuss nor a red ants' nest ef we doesn't be ormighty keeful. Ef ther ha'r-t'arers jumps us, we'll gi'n 'em a few lead pills, skute fer our 'tricks,' then ter our critters, when ther word'll be jump stock an' git up an' git; but we mustn't break kiver er we're gone coons, dead sure an' sartain."

Silently the twain now crawled to their former starting-point; on reaching which, they made a bee-line for the gully in which they had passed the night.

On the way, their gaze had been fastened down the creek toward the point at which they expected danger, if from anywhere, and consequently they did not glance to the earth for a moment, not thinking it possible that an Indian spy might be seeking "sign" of enemies on that side of the Fork.

With good reason they concluded that any spy, who might be ordered on an investigating tour, would inspect the plain toward Fort Phantom Hill, as no foes to the Comanches were to be looked for from any other quarter.

Suddenly, however, an ejaculation of surprise from Single-Eye, who had dropped upon hands and knees, startled Old Rocky, who was then standing at the mouth of the wash-out.

"Jee-ruserlum jingoos! Dang my cats! Ef hyer ain't er fresh moggersun-track, yer kin zounge my peeper out, an' I'll feel fer 'sign' hyer-arter!"

These words were spoken in a low, hoarse voice that denoted astonishment and concern. Then the scout sprung to his feet, passed his carbine to his companion, and darted along the back trail, and over the stream. Then drawing his bowie, he placed it between his teeth, and crawled into the undergrowth.

As his pard made these lightning-like movements, Old Rocky darted into a thicket, secure from sight, and gazed anxiously over the Elm Fork, listening intently for sounds that would indicate the position and actions of his friend. The assertion of Single-Eye, in regard to the fresh "sign," convinced the old man, that their lives, and possibly the lives of the captives taken from the coach, depended upon the death of this red-skin, whose track was plainly outlined in the soft clay before him.

The scouts both well knew that this spy was on their trail; and, had not Single-Eye got the start of him, Old Rocky would have been at once upon his track. On crept the former, however, as stealthily as a snake, yet making rapid progress, and straining his senses and muscles to the very utmost. On he went, his gaze bent ahead, but flashing quick glances upon the earth, where his hands must fall, in order not to jeopardize his chances of success by even the snap of a twig.

He arrived just in the nick of time.

Dame Fortune had most certainly favored him.

As he came up, the red spy arose on his knees, grasped the bushes in each hand, thrusting the same right and left, and gazing out upon the plain. The Comanche was in full war-paint.

At his back were his quiver, bow, and shield; even his long scalping-knife was not removed from its sheath, as the hideous brave evidently expected to discover those whom he had been trailing out upon the plain.

Single-Eye wasted not a moment. Immediately he sprung to his feet, stepped quickly and softly along the trail; and then, with bowie tightly clutched, he bounded forward, his teeth set, his eye measuring every outline of his foe, as he calculated distance, movements, and surroundings.

Then, down he came at the back of the brave, grasping the long hair of his victim on the instant, and jerking the head of the savage backward, as his terrible bowie shot down into the painted breast, hilt deep, and crashing with a horrid, grating sound, through flesh and bone!

With a movement, quick almost as lightning, Single-Eye jerked out the deadly blade, thrusting it this time into the throat of the savage; thus changing the horrible sounding death-yell, that in all probability, would have signaled the doom of the scouts, into an awful, gurgling, blood-smothered cry—a cry that could scarce have been distinguished half a pistol-shot in distance from the scene of the encounter.

Death struck—from the time that the bowie pierced his vitals.

The Comanche beat the bushes with spasmodic blows, thrashing his arms and contorting his body, as his eyes gazed fixedly into the solitary optic of his slayer.

Dread, superstitious horror, murderous hate, and terrible agony were alternately shown in the depths of those glassy orbs; but they soon became listless and the red brave sunk at the feet of Single-Eye, a senseless clod, a horrible, blood-smear, paint-daubed corpse.

Stooping down, the old scout, with dexterous cut and slash, scalped his foe, and waved the gory trophy in triumph over his head in silent, but expressive exultation.

Then he strode coolly back to rejoin his anxiously-waiting prairie pard, their mutual adversary, whom they had so much to dread, removed from their path.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE TOILS.

THE roar, and rush, and shriek of the "norther" had spent themselves when Will Washburne regained his senses.

At first it was difficult for the young man to comprehend the situation.

He felt chilled and benumbed, and in addition was suffering from the stoppage of circulation by the tightly-drawn strips of buffalo-skin that were around his limbs.

However, he remained not long in ignorance or doubt as to his position. His sufferings were most unnaturally agonizing, and as he attempted to arise and wrench himself free, gathering all the strength within the muscles that he could control in an effort that was almost superhuman, he found himself completely powerless.

He was held as in a vise, and mental anguish was speedily added to his physical tortures, when he recalled the terrible fight with the savage foe, the death of the driver and passengers and his own mad efforts to protect poor Flora.

As the thought of the now captive maiden came back to his mind, and he remembered that it was through his persuadings and counsel that she had come to the frontier—when he thought of this his brain became convulsed with agony the most intense, and the bodily suffering that was his, seemed nothing in comparison, and was for the time forgotten.

Where now was Flora Florence?

Dead, perhaps—slain by the red demons, and mutilated; or possibly borne far away, to become a victim to their hellish passions!

Great God! Where is thy mercy—where, thy justice?

And where was he, Will Washburne, himself.

These were the questions that flashed through the racked brain of the young man, and which now threatened to drive him to madness.

The noise of the winds, warring with the mighty giants of the bottom, was the only sound that met his ear, listen intently though he did.

He knew what the elemental struggle meant, though his previous knowledge of such had been but by hearsay. By the chilling and cutting rush of the wind, he felt that a "norther" was prevailing; and he ascertained also that he lay, bound to stakes that were driven into the earth, within the lofty timber. Doubtless this was the Elm Fork Bottom; but how long a time he had lain senseless, or what distance from the stage he had been conveyed, was a mystery.

More important was the question—where were the Comanches, and what had been the fate of the poor unfortunate Flora?

At length Will was forced to the conclusion that he had been bound beyond the possibility of escape and had been left in that condition, doomed to a lingering death by thirst and starvation.

He was fully satisfied of this.

He writhed and twisted in his agony, but in vain. All his efforts to extricate himself were useless, and only served to increase his sufferings. At length he desisted, and gave himself up to suffering and despair.

Suddenly, in a brief lull of the "norther," which seemed at times to pause, and gather strength for another and wilder rush against the timber, the young man heard the snorting of a horse.

The sound revived a faint hope in him; for he reasoned that a horse would not be in the neighborhood, unless a human being was somewhere nigh at hand.

So great had been his despair but a moment previous, that he now felt a heavy load lifted from his mind. He preferred to be surrounded by, and in the power of the merciless Comanches, rather than be left to starve, and gasp out his life in solitude.

He had almost begun to think that the sound, after all, had existed only in his imagination, when the presence of human beings became, all at once, manifest by a guttural grunt, a peculiar odor, and the touch of a hand, feeling to ascertain if his bonds were secure.

For aught he knew to the contrary, the Indian, for he knew it to be one, might be bending over him for the purpose of stabbing him to the heart; but Will felt that, if he but knew that Flora Florence was dead, he would welcome the knife, as a stroke of mercy, rather than linger to suffer the torture that else must be his doom.

Satisfied that his captive was secure, the Comanche brave stole away in the darkness, and Will was again alone with the howling tempest, and his own harrowing thoughts.

A night that seemed an eternity of agony, mental and physical, thus passed; and, as the timber became visible in the gray uncertain light, Will Washburne found himself strangely touched with sympathy for the tortured trees, that seemed as powerless in the hands of the "norther," as was he himself in the bonds of his captors.

Soon the thought of Flora was again uppermost, and he shot glances around him in every direction, to ascertain if the poor girl was within view. All that he could, as yet, per-

ceive, were strange-looking objects, here and there, in the lee of the bank, and thus protected from the storm—objects, covered with robes of buffalo-skins and blankets—and Will, upon discovering these, knew that he was in the midst of the war-party.

After scanning, with piercing glances, every point except that directly behind him, he at length succeeded, though with much pain and difficulty, in gaining a view in that quarter; but no sooner did his gaze become fastened in that direction, than he became frantic in his despair and rage.

There, bound to a tree-trunk, her head hanging listlessly upon her breast, her long golden hair veiling her features, was Flora Florence!

Senseless she undoubtedly was; prostrated in mind and body, by her dread surroundings, and lost in hopeless anguish and misery!

Will Washburne sunk back, faint and deathly, a deep groan bursting from his lips; but he was helpless, even as was the sweet suffering companion of his bonds and agonies.

Ere long the braves were astir, and a dozen camp-fires were soon blazing under the north-west bank. Around these fires clustered the painted bands, preparing their morning meal.

Ever enjoying a sight of torture, these hideous demons employed themselves in casting, from pointed sticks, hot, sputtering chunks of horse-meat, directly upon the bare flesh of the young man, burning the same to a blister. Though the terrible pain was almost maddening, the features of Will betrayed no sign to his tormentors of what he endured.

So impressed were the savages by this, that one and another grunted in admiration.

"He heap brave!"

"Mebbe so, chief say long torture."

"Fight like warrior, die like warrior."

"He no squaw!"

The fortitude of their captive entitled him, in their opinion, to the distinction of a long and lingering death.

At last, however, Will relapsed into a semi-conscious state, oblivious to all that was in progress in the camp. Meanwhile, Flora recovered her senses, and seeing Will thus outstretched, became almost frantic until she at length perceived that he had not been killed. He lived, and there might yet be hope for them both.

The thongs, that bound the young girl's wrists behind her, were now cut, and an Indian proffered her some of the broiled meat. He then reclined upon the grass by her side, watching her every movement; although an attempt, on her part to escape, would have been utter madness.

Soon, an Indian of commanding presence, approached the captives.

He had three eagle-feathers flaunting from a beaded fillet that was about his head; this insignia of rank, as well as highly ornamented belt and leggings, and the superior workmanship and decorations of his weapons, as well as an engraved breast-plate of silver, proclaiming him a chief—evidently the head war-chief of this branch of the Comanche tribe.

The Indian stood near the feet of Will for full five minutes, his arms folded, and his snake-like eyes darting glances from one to the other of his captives. It was obvious that the prostration from which Will suffered did not suit the chief, for he gave an impatient guttural order, which was followed by a brave loosening somewhat the tightly-drawn cords that bound the limbs of the sufferer.

This done, the chief advanced a few steps toward Flora. The poor girl shuddered with horror, as she detected a gloating, exultant expression in his villainous eyes. This, however, seemed to merge, as he continued to gaze, into one of adoration, approaching superstitious reverence, as the angelic beauty of the maiden was at length fully realized by him.

The stoical mask, so habitual to his people, vanished from the face of the chief. Although he spoke not a word, but turned, and strode from view into the thicket, Flora felt that the inspection he had made of his captives had resulted in a decision as to the fate of both.

Time passed. The fierce "norther" died entirely away. Then the encampment became a scene of bustle and preparation.

Two horses were led from the thicket, and poor Flora was bound upon the back of one of them, but in such a manner as not to cause pain.

Then, half a dozen braves released Will from the stakes, and lifted him bodily upon the other horse; securing him there beyond all hope of release. Slowly, the young man returned to a consciousness of his dread position; but, before he could form words to address Flora, whom he discovered near at hand, the animal upon which he had been placed was led from the vicinity, out from the timber, and soon both the captives were speeding over the plain northwesterly, in the midst of the savage horde.

On rode this horrible cohort, flying like dry leaves before a gale; and thus sped this pallid and hopeless girl, and the strong young man bound, and writhing in agony.

A signal yell from the front soon caused the war-party to jerk jaw-strap; and, with snorts of pain, the wild-eyed mustangs were brought

to earth, their long tails mingling with the prairie-grass and flowers.

The mental torture of poor Flora had been beyond the imagination of any one not thus situated, and her mind and brain had thus become dazed and blunted. She had arrived at that stage of blank and hopeless despair that made her listless and indifferent to all that might be in store for her.

In this way she rode amid her captors; but Will, whose condition had but recently been much the same as hers, had now become more like himself.

His mind was now busy in evolving plans of escape, and the chances of saving Flora from a horrible fate.

Eagerly he scanned the surrounding braves, taking notice of the direction in which they traveled; and braced himself by hopeful thoughts, resolutely crushing down the hopeless apathy and despondency that but now had taken complete possession of him. He now recalled the fact that the stage, when attacked, was near Fort Phantom Hill, and that its non-arrival could not fail to cause a scouting-party to be dispatched up the trail.

The debris of the coach, and the mutilated bodies would thus be discovered, and the party would undoubtedly follow the trail of the Comanches.

There was hope to Will in this thought, and the sight which met his view as the war-party now jerked their mustangs to a halt, increased it.

He could not but anticipate a long delay of the Indians, caused by the discovery which had thus made them pause in their flight.

Far ahead, and stretching as far as the eye could reach over the north plain, Will saw a vast rolling sea of bison speeding in a wild stampede toward the south, and cutting off further progress of the Comanches to the west, the direction in which the war-party was pointed.

Little did poor Will dream of the thoughts and plans that ruled the mind of the Comanche chief, as he sat and viewed the buffalo stampede.

CHAPTER XIII.

MAZEPPA.

AFTER "wiping out" the Comanche spy, Single-Eye proceeded with his former caution, giving a bird like chirp as a signal, which was at once answered by Old Rocky.

The latter needed not the gory proof which his pard carried, to show that his work was well done. Each extended a hand to the other in silence.

"I observe that ther biz hev commenced," said Old Rocky, at length; "an' thet ye're right on ther jump afore ther word. Reckon things'll pan out kinder lively, 'cordin' ter ther way we've made ther start."

"I b'lieve ye're 'bout kerrect, Ole Rock," agreed Single-Eye; "fer, from thet red hair-matcher bein' on ther back trail, I'm inclined ter opine that ther condemned kiotes air all up crick, an' purty consider'ble narvous 'gards ther 'long-knives' comin' a-b'illin' arter 'em. Hit hes thet sort o' a look ter this hyer ole raw-hide ripper; though, es I hesn't gut but one peeper, an' air 'bout half-starved fer grub an' sleep, mebbe so I'm a leetle off my kerbase."

"Howsomever, I'm a-thinkin' we-uns hed better strike down crick without any lingerin', fer ef they 'spects ther red trailer back ag'in ter 'spatiate on ther looks o' things this-a-ways, an' he doesn't turn up—an' I'm ormighty sure he won't—they mought make a dash up-stream, an' knock our p'ogramme all ter flinders."

"Waal, glide hit air," agreed Old Rocky. So, stealthily as possible, the two proceeded down the stream, keeping well toward the western edge of the timber.

They were forced, of necessity, to follow a winding course, taking advantage of the densest line of thicket, and crawling upon their hands and knees, while they listened intently for any sounds that would indicate the proximity of the Comanches.

At length, judging themselves to be near the point of danger, they became still more cautious in their movements.

Soon both the scouts sunk backward, and gazed at each other in great surprise.

"Dang'd ef we-uns hain't struck plum on ther camp!" whispered Single-Eye.

"Ya-as," replied his pard; "but ther condemned scarifiers hes levanted, skuted, lit out! Dog-gone my 'Merican heart, ef hit ain't pervokin'! An' we-uns can't foller 'em, without we lingers a sun abint, er they'll freeze thar peepers onter us, an' wipe us out. Hit's cl'ar country, west, an' we're a bamboozled pa'r o' be-fogged fools, run plum ag'in' a stump!"

"Hit's ormighty pervokin', pard, I knows; but hit'll never do ter give up this-a-way. I'm arter thet caliker-kivered female 'oman, an' I'm ther pilgrim thet hes tuck a affidavt thet ther ornary red bellyuns ain't a-goin' ter tote her to'ard ther Staked Plains without losin' a heap o' ha'r."

"Ef thar's sich a thing in ther record, Single-Eye air a-goin' ter save ther gal, er flop over an' j-rk out his breathe a-tryin'. Come on,

ward; le's take er gaze 'round ther camp o' ther heathun, keepin' a eye open fer loose ha'r an' feathers."

Cautiously as before, the scouts emerged from the thicket into a space, comparatively free from undergrowth and much trampled, while here and there were camp fires still smoldering.

Critically they examined the whole bottom before they exposed themselves to view. Suddenly Single-Eye halted, and pointed to several stakes that projected from the earth, examining also a small sapling near them.

"Hit's a dead sartain fac' now," he said, "thet ther painted bellyuns hev gut a white man an' a female 'oman."

"Thar's whar ther cusses stretched him fer ther night, an' he must ha' suffered a heap; an' hyer's whar they tied ther kaliker-kivered human, what must be a sorter fust-cut 'ristercratic gal er she wouldn't ha' bin a-ridin' in ther hearse, fer hit costs big money from St. Louis er any o' ther stations this side o' thar."

"Yer right, pard, every time; but I sw'ar I doesn't keer ter linger hyer. Hit's enough ter know thar's civerlized humans bein' kerried off ter tortur' by ther smoky-skinned sons o' Satan, an' I can't stan' hit."

"We-uns wouldn't be half-white not ter skute on ther trail an' try ter save 'em. Ef they wipes us out, an' we-uns sheds our ha'r suddint-like wi' ther help o' a Comanch' knife, why we kin bet thet ther Great Spirit'll gi'n us a easy trail, wi' plenty o' water-grass an' game 'long-side o' hit, arter we gits up above."

"Ef we gits hashed fer tryin' ter save our feller-humans from tortur', we'll git our reward 'cordin' ter ther squar' way o' doin' biz—an' I'm ready ter perceed."

"Come on an' take a squint over ther west perrarer," advised Single-Eye, who, though much depressed at finding that the Comanches had broken camp, felt the necessity now, if they would follow the trail of the savages, to keep out of their view in the rear, owing to the great stretch of open country before them.

It was only in the night that they could hope to approach the red foe with any chance of success; and they now felt deep regret in regard to the discovery of their trail, and from having been forced to kill the red spy; for the latter not having returned, the Indians would now be suspicious of danger in their rear, and be doubly watchful in consequence.

But all these harrowing and depressing thoughts were nothing compared with those that were to come.

They were destined soon to gaze upon a scene that would increase their thirst for revenge, besides changing all their plans and forcing them, from humane feelings and sympathy for the suffering of others, to part from each other, and each to encounter the dangers of their mission alone.

They had not passed half the distance between the deserted camp and the western edge of the timber of Elm Fork bottom, when they were both brought to a halt on hearing faint yells from the western plain.

A horrible scene now met their view.

As the scouts gazed, thunderstruck with deep concern and astonishment, they perceived that the vast, limitless plain, which extended westward as far as eye could reach, was one vast sea of bison, in numbers beyond the power of human mind to estimate.

Not a break was visible in the vast ocean of brutes, and the very ground trembled with the thunder of their countless hoofs in that wild stampede.

The sight was a grand and magnificent one, and such as but few men have ever seen and none that now live, or are to be born, will ever see; for the time has long since passed when a single stream of thickly-massed buffalo, beyond the scope of vision in width, occupy days in passing a single point of observation, covering the vast plain entirely from view in their headlong rush north or south—according to the season of the year—frenzied to madness by storms, or hunters, or perhaps imaginary dangers.

It was not, however, the mammoth buffalo stampede that affected the two scouts—this was no uncommon sight to them—but that which strained their attention and caused them to mutter fresh oaths of vengeance, was a scene just on the border of it.

In all the paraphernalia of savage warfare, with flaunting feathers, hair and scalps, seated upon their horses, was the war-party that had attacked the coach. They had apparently but recently left the camp which the scouts had just inspected.

A fierce bull bison had been lassoed, and was now held helpless by ropes around his legs and horns.

Two warriors who had dismounted were attaching lariats firmly around the neck and body of the huge beast, while two others held a white man, whose clothing had been almost completely torn from his body, and his hands fast bound, but who stood erect and defiant, gazing toward a female figure in the midst of the horde of taunting Comanches.

The woman appeared to be weeping in anguish of heart at the scene before her, but her voice,

as well as that of the man, was drowned by the yells of the exultant fiends by whom she was surrounded.

No sooner did all this meet the eyes of the scouts than, in an instant, they comprehended the nature of the hellish proceedings. Their knowledge of Indian character forced them to conclude that the man who stood there defiant, with the prospect of a horrible death awaiting him, was the one who had fought like a tiger when the stage was attacked, and was, in consequence, condemned to a death of lingering torture—a death that would cause his bravery, fortitude and fearlessness to be transformed into the weakness of a woman; that would make him a babbling, shrieking skeleton, his tongue swollen, his lips cracked, his eyes like balls of fire and his brain like seething, molten metal, while he was borne over the vast plains, praying insanelly for the death that was so slow in overtaking him.

Well did the scouts know the doom of this man. Had the scene been a puzzle to them they would not have remained long in ignorance, for the captive was soon clutched by bronzed hands and thrown roughly upon the back of the bison; his knees were bound fast to the rope near the croup of the buffalo, and his feet and legs left thus hanging down over its hams.

His belt was fastened with cords to the rope around the body of the beast. Then his wrists were cut loose, and his elbows secured to the lariat about the bison's neck, the wrists being connected by tightly-drawn cords about the body of the animal.

A fierce yell burst from the assembled braves when this was completed. Then the ropes were cut loose, except the two lassoes that were fastened to the beast's horns; an Indian on either side having the other ends attached to their saddles.

"These now rode forward, while those on foot pricked the buffalo with their lance points."

This drove the animal, with mad snorts, in a quartering direction into the vast herd now thundering toward the south.

Having gone a short distance within the herd, which the two braves parted with great difficulty, the lassoes were detached from the horns of the bull and the frenzied animal dashed into the stream of brutes.

The demons' work had begun. Far out on the rolling sea of maddened brutes could be seen the half-naked form of a white man, outstretched upon the back of a frenzied beast, his pallid face upturned to the sky, as if pleading to Heaven for the mercy that was denied him on earth.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FOILED CONSPIRATORS.

SHAKING the very earth as it went, the buffalo stampede thundered on, nearly in a line with the war party. As it dashed forward, the chief yelled a series of commands to the braves nearest him, being barely able to make himself heard, and half a dozen warriors immediately urged their steeds from the main war-party, and detaching their lassoes as they rode, coiled them and adjusted the nooses.

They thus approached the margin of the stampede in a half-circle, and soon the unerring lariats hissed through the air, while the throwers still rode in a mad gallop.

Secure by the horns, they now held a fierce, maddened bull, frantic bellowings bursting from his mouth, as he tore up the ground in his rage.

No sooner was this done than another yell from the chief caused two more braves to advance, leading the horse to which Will had been bound.

The captive was now conducted toward the lassoed bison, and then, as Will Washburne was conveyed past Flora, his soul's undying love in his eyes, he cried out in a voice of hope even then:

"Bear up, Flora darling! Bear up; for the troops from the fort will follow the trail and save you. You will then meet your uncle, and the wrongs that have clouded your life will pass from you forever. Think sometimes of Will, whose last prayer is for your protection. For me there is no escape. Farewell, my darling; may we meet above!"

Although the poor girl could not distinguish all that he said, the scene spoke plainly.

"Father in heaven!" she cried in her anguish, "save him, protect him! Hast Thou, indeed, forsaken Thy children?"

Gazing thus, trembling in every limb, Flora saw the form of her lover lashed upon the maddened beast. This was but for a moment, and then her ears were filled with the yells of the savages, as they urged their horses toward the bison, while their comrades detached the loosened lassoes.

Again rung the terrific yells, while quirts hissed through the air, and wild-eyed mustangs bounded in every direction. Then out from the opening thus made, shot the terrified brute, poor Will fast bound upon its back.

Away over the plain, toward its kind, darted the burdened bison, its eyes gleaming like coals of fire from out the mass of long hair on its forehead; on, until the margin of the thunder-

ing mass was reached, when the doubly-affrighted beast rushed in among the herd, as if seeking close companionship, even at the risk of being hurled to earth, and trampled by their countless hoofs into a shapeless mass.

Flora Florence saw all this as in a horrid dream. Then, as the mad tide thundered on, and she could perceive the form that she sought, as if borne upon the wave of a resistless torrent, she sunk forward upon the neck of her mustang, only prevented from falling to the prairie sward by the bonds that held her.

At an order from his chief a burly brave now urged his horse to the side of the maiden, and severing the cords with his scalping knife, grasped her in his arms; then, as a signal-whop sounded, quirts again hissed, and on in a mad mass toward the north, and along the edge of the stampede, dashed the snorting mustangs, bearing their merciless masters, with poor Flora in their midst—an angel among demons—her beautiful face pressed to the paint-daubed breast of a fiend in human shape.

On, toward the Clear Fork of the Rio Brazos, the much-wronged and tortured girl was being borne north, while bound fast upon the back of a frenzied bison bull, dashing at terrific speed toward the arid plains of the south, amid a sea of affrighted brutes, was Will Washburne, his eyes closed, his breast and face blistered by the burning fat that had been thrown upon him by his torturers, as well as by the blazing sun that shot down mercilessly from its throne in the brazen sky. Thus were these two faithful ones parted.

But neither of them dreamed for a moment that the eyes of two of the bravest and most daring and skillful scouts of the Southwest border had witnessed it all, and that they had sworn to save them both, if it lay in the power of man to do so.

Scarcely had the stage that conveyed Will and Flora from Fort Belknap been gone half a day, when two horsemen entered the town and dismounted near the post-office, which was also the stage station.

There they secured their horses and entered the building, which presented the appearance of the usual combination store of the border; the postmaster being at the same time merchant, physician, apothecary, salesman, and stage-agent.

These two men were none other than Mart Maxwell and Rand Rogers, who, having reached Shreveport on the next boat after Will Washburne, and discovered the flight of Flora, traced the latter to Marshall, and there ascertained that she was traveling under the protection of a young man who claimed to be her brother.

Mart Maxwell was furious upon being informed of Flora's having disappeared so suddenly and secretly from the seminary; but when he found, in addition, that she had a protector, one who professed to be her brother, his rage knew no bounds. His companion was equally exasperated at the turn affairs had taken.

The future of both of them had, of late, so much depended upon Flora Florence, that they had never felt anything but sanguine in regard to meeting her.

Now, finding that she had fled, the conclusion was inevitable that, in some way, she had ascertained the truth in regard to her parentage; and with it a knowledge of the character and intentions of her life-long guardian.

The affair was all the more complicated by the fact of the girl's having left in company with one who was called her brother; for they well knew that she had no such relative.

Ascertaining, however, beyond a doubt, that she had gone direct toward Fort Belknap, they were more convinced that she had been informed regarding her family in some mysterious manner, and that she was now on her way to join her father's brother, Captain Forrest Florence, at Fort Davis.

They became more decided in their convictions when they learned that Flora and her escort had traveled to Fort Belknap in a Government ambulance with an army officer, and escorted by a guard of soldiers. At first they feared that the officer might be Captain Florence, who had met his niece by appointment at the terminus of the up-country stage line from Marshall, and that the young man had been sent to the seminary to fetch her away; but, from inquiries, they learned that the officer was not at all acquainted with those whom he had favored—not having known anything of them previous to their starting for Fort Belknap.

From all that he could ascertain, Mart Maxwell thought it possible that Flora might still be at the latter place. But certainly, never before were two ruffians more completely taken aback in their proposed plans. Maxwell had indeed asserted to Rogers, before leaving New Orleans, that bad luck was in store for them; for the reason that he had been to the asylum, where he expected to find Mrs. Florence, and had been informed that the lady had escaped from the institution the same year in which she had been placed there—an under-official, with whom Mart, in his assumed character as the brother of the patient, had transacted all busi-

ness connected with her, having all along deceived him, in order that he might pocket the amount agreed upon for her keeping.

This startling discovery caused the villain great apprehension and anxiety; and he resolved that he would at once force Flora into a marriage with his accomplice. When, however, the girl's flight was discovered, both the plotters became greatly alarmed.

If this last scheme of theirs, upon which their whole future depended, should fail, they were hopelessly beggared. Should it succeed, an immense fortune was within their grasp. Succeed, then, it must.

But, if Flora's uncle had discovered her history, they must be known to be the abductors of herself and her mother; and if the latter had recovered her reason, she would doubtless recall the scene in the cabin of Old Mose Mitchell, when he, Maxwell, had tauntingly informed her that he had murdered her husband.

All this greatly alarmed Mart; yet, as Mrs. Florence had never seen Rand, except when she was insane, she would not connect him with the terrible past, when he should put in his appearance as her son-in-law. Hence, if Flora could be overtaken and secured, all might yet be well; and, to the accomplishment of this, both villains bent their minds and energies. But they were now in a desperate frame of mind.

On entering the post-office, and making some casual inquiries in regard to the next coach down country, and as to how many had taken passage on the last trip south, they found that Flora and her mysterious escort had really gone from Fort Belknap; and not only that, but that she was on the direct way to her uncle's post.

All doubt was now removed. Both were fully convinced that, in some inexplicable manner, Flora had discovered the secret of her birth, as also the existence and whereabouts of an uncle. Should she now be permitted to join the latter, their future prospects would be ruined.

They knew that they could overtake the stage, before it reached the Pecos River. It was their one move, and they must make it.

Mart Maxwell's hope of success was increased by recalling the fact, that an outlaw comrade of his own had taken to the business of road-agent; and, with his band, had a rendezvous between the Concho and Colorado rivers.

The two ruffians now procured fresh horses, and provided themselves with all that was necessary for the trip, set out southward, pretending that they were about to spend a week on the edge of the buffalo range.

But, once out of view from the bluff, Mart and Rand drove spurs, and sped along the stage-road at a mad gallop; resolved that they would pass the coach during the night, then secrete themselves, and with the other desperate outlaws whom they expected to come upon, halt the coach, and secure the maiden at all hazards.

CHAPTER XV.

OLD ROCKY TO THE RESCUE.

"DANG my cats, ef ther red helyuns hain't gut nigh down ter ther cuss-work!" exclaimed Old Rocky. "Hyer's hefty biz fer 'bout forty tough shutters and slashers, an' only two o' us to foller ther trails."

"Hit air a ormighty curious fix to be etched in," agreed Single-Eye; "but one on us hes gut ter glide 'cross range 'bout a full sun abint ther pesky heathun; an' lay fer a show ter crawl in, an' snake ket lettle gal outen ther clutches. An' t'other hes a right hard an' long lope ahead, ter try an' save that poor human what's a-playin' circus on a buffler-bull, fer ther 'musement o' a awjence o' condemned stinkin' buzzards an' coyotes, what's a-follerin' ter pick his eyes out, an' dissect him gin'rally."

"Pard Rock, we-uns must part; fer I sw'ar I'm goin' one eye on one o' ther trails. I'm incernated ter opine that that man on ther buffler plugged a heap o' reds, when ther painted pirts went a-billin' arter ther hearse, else they'd 'a' slashed an' scalped him right thar."

"A Cormanch 'll gi'n a pilgrim a lingerin' send off ef he shows a heap o' sand, as yer knows."

As Single-Eye spoke, both men gazed over the plain, and watched the head of the herd of bison swerving gradually to the southwest, to avoid the line of timber that marked the course of Elm Fork; the war-party proceeding north, between the timber and the stampeding beasts.

"Ye're mighty right, clean through yer gab," said his pard, with a worried look, as he ejected a squirt of tobacco juice spitefully into the bushes; "somethin' hev gut ter be did suddint-like, er that pilgrim on ther buffler 'll git hashed an' stomped es flat es a slap-jack."

"Ther dang'd bull air apt ter git a tumble with him, an' ther ropes a-worritin' ther animile; an' then hit's good-by ter ther pa'r."

"Es ter ther lettle gal, hit's a-goin' ter be fine work, an' a lingerin' risky job ter save her ha'r—dog-goned ef hit hain't! Reckon we-uns 'll hev ter pull straws 'gards which way we pints; though ther one thet skins out arter ther poor feller on ther buffler may hev a show ter glide up an' jine in on ther trail arter ther gal."

"Hit's a ormighty condemned shame ther ther caliker-kivered female women doesn't know 'nough ter stay in ther States, an' keep thar back ha'r outen ther clutches o' ther red scari-fyers."

"Howsomever, they 'll sift tharselves this-a-ways, I reckon, es long es thar's a male human they kin git on ther trail of."

"Tell us what yer perpose, Ole Rock," said Single-Eye. "Thar ain't no time ter sling chin music."

"Hyer's ther p'ogramme, clean through," was the reply. "I'll saddle my critter, an' strike down on ther south side o' Elm Fork timmer. Thar ain't no use a-losin' time goin' arter ther soger boyees, fer I'm dead sure thar ain't a baker's dozen et Phantom Hill, 'count ev a big hefty sprinklin' ev 'em bein' down Concho-way, ter cut off Lone Wolf's raiders."

"Come ter 'member, hit air jist es yer puts hit, Ole Rock. When we glided up-country, they war a-gittin' out a expedish, es they calls hit."

"Hyer we air, an' Skip-lively hev tored grass lively, by ther swell o' his 'natermy. Skip, I'll gi'n yer a show ter exercise an' dergest ther big feed yer hes stowed in, an' ter shake ther p'ison outen a few pesky perrarer promernadin' red pirts, ef ye're incernated thet-a-way, afore yer turns tail ter sunset ag'in."

The two scouts now moved with haste, and in a few moments' time after they had led their animals to the wash-out, where they had temporarily "cached" their equipments, they were ready for the trails: one to proceed with great caution up Elm Fork, and screened from the view of the Indians by the timber of the same, speed toward the southwest, to attempt the rescue of Will Washburne from his perilous position.

Quickly they both mounted, and urged their horses together. Then they grasped hands in a farewell shake that might be forever. Not a word was spoken, but the look of each spoke volumes.

Hastily, and as if the parting was a painful one, they whirled their horses, and both darted into the dense undergrowth; Single-Eye going down the stream to the north, and Old Rocky up Elm Fork toward the southwest.

It was not the first time by many, that these two scouts had thus parted, and gone into great dangers for the sake of others; but on every such occasion, they had realized fully that they might never again meet.

Old Rocky was well-mounted, and as he was of light weight, having but little in his saddle-bags besides absolute necessities, that might incumber him, he drove spurs as soon as he cleared the timber, and dashed along the edge of the same; the rumble of the terrific stampede being distinctly audible, although the vast herd of bison were on the opposite side of the river.

One piercing glance toward Fort Phantom Hill told the old scout that there were no soldiers upon the plain in that direction; so he urged his noble steed onward, knowing that a human life depended upon the speed he maintained, and that every moment of delay was one of most agonizing torture to the suffering man, in that fearful ride.

Listening intently as he dashed forward, the practiced ear of the scout detected the position of the head of the herd. He well knew every crook and turn of the stream, and therefore he now took a course that included every advantage of them; keeping his horse at a headlong gallop continually, the level ground favoring him.

The old trailer well knew that, and less than twenty miles from the Comanche camp, where he had parted from his pard, Single Eye, there was a creek, flowing from the north into Elm Fork; and that the buffalo stampede would without much doubt, be stopped at that point, as much from the fatigue of the animals as from the thirst that must torture them after their long run over the hot plain.

He knew also, that the bull to which the men had been bound would, from the fright it had received upon being lassoed by the Indians, and from the ropes and the strange burden upon its back, be much more liable to leave the stampeding mass of its fellow-brutes than if it had not been molested; for the animal would be greatly wearied and tortured by excitement and fear more than would be any of the others.

Old Rocky had not previously considered this; but now, as it occurred to him, he dashed into the stream, and fording it, crossed through the north line of trees as soon as he decided that he was safe from discovery by the Comanches.

Having reached a point from which he could peep through the branches of the undergrowth, the old scout immediately felt great relief, for he perceived that the leader of the herd was but little in advance of his position, and that the animals were galloping in a much slower and more labored gait. He saw also that there was a northward bend of Elm Fork in front of them, and there, unquestionably, the stampede would end.

The leaders, Old Rocky felt positive, would make halt if possible, to drink; indeed, they would be forced into the stream by the overwhelming mass in their rear, which would un-

doubtedly press them out of, as well as into the stream, and cause a general scattering as they emerged on the opposite side of the timber. There, again, they would be made frantic by his appearance, should he dash among them to save the man.

This perplexed Old Rocky greatly. He was extremely anxious, especially when, upon scanning the herd, he could not discover the white face and breast of the tortured human being whom he had resolved to save. But, as he could see the head of the herd, he decided to go down the stream a short distance and view it as it passed, scanning it keenly for a sight of the man whom he sought.

He had not proceeded far through the timber, when he heard a terrific crashing of the bushes in front of him, as if some large and affrighted beast was plunging toward the stream from the plain.

Spurring forward, and keeping his gaze toward the point of commotion, Old Rocky soon to his relief and joy, saw the pallid face of the suffering man exposed for a moment above the surface of the undergrowth, and disappearing from his view down the bank of the river, a moment after.

Loosening the lariat from his saddle-horn, the scout secured his panting horse; then, drawing his bowie, he dashed toward the stream, knowing that the life of the victim of Comanche cruelty depended upon his immediate action, dexterity and skill—that is, if life had not already left that corpse-like form, bound upon the back of the terrified beast.

The reasonings of Old Rocky in regard to the situation of affairs, and as to what action he must take, were lightning-like.

He knew that the crashing of his horse through the bushes would be likely to cause the buffalo, which was, without doubt, drinking, to bound away once more in flight, tearing the flesh of the sufferer on the bushes as it went.

Taking from his belt a small but strong lasso, he coiled it up and fastened it for an emergency. He then hastened stealthily along the bison-path in the direction of the stream. Having reached the bank, which was but a few feet high, he discovered the bull, the man still on his back, within six feet of the bank. At once the plans of Old Rocky were formed.

Securing the slack end of his lasso to a tree-trunk, he adjusted the noose and coil; then, without further delay, he sent the rawhide hissing through the air.

The noose settled over the bison's horns, and the terrified animal plunged frantically forward, jerking taut the lasso.

Knife in hand, the old scout bounded far out into the shallow stream, in which the bellowing and affrighted bull now madly struggled.

As the brute caught sight of the old scout, there followed a great splashing and spattering of the waters, in its frantic endeavors to escape. But, meanwhile, the bowie of Old Rocky slashed here and there, severing ropes wherever he struck.

So rapid, indeed, were his strokes, realizing as he did that his lasso could not long hold out under the great strain of the buffalo's weight and struggles; that his keen and glittering blade hastened the catastrophe; severing the lasso with one wild, unaimed thrust, the bull plunged headforemost upon its knees into the stream, then up with one maddened bound, and on amid seething and foaming waters to the further bank.

Amazed and filled with self-condemnation, the old scout stood dumfounded, and knee-deep in the creek, for a moment, gazing with open mouth; but, as the bison clambered up the opposite bank, Old Rocky gave a yell of joy and triumph.

At the same time he started, wading quickly over the stream; for, as the animal struggled up the bank, his burden slipped off and down into the waters, thus proving that the old scout had severed the ropes that had bound the form of Will Washburne to the beast, or else cut them so nearly through that they had parted in the struggle that followed.

Clasping the victim of Comanche cruelty in his arms with tender solicitude, Old Rocky quickly placed his hand upon the blistered breast of the young man. He then gave a cry of relief as he found that he had been in time.

The youth, who had been doomed by his savage captors to a terrible death, was alive—saved in a manner little short of the miraculous, from the buzzards and coyotes of the plains.

CHAPTER XVI.

SINGLE-EYE AT SUNSET.

IMMEDIATELY upon parting from Old Rocky, Single-Eye banished all thoughts of his old pard and his mission, and bent his whole mind upon the work which he had set himself to do.

He knew that Elm Fork, for ten miles flowed directly north, then turned northeast for five miles, and emptied into the Clear Fork. He also knew that, from this turning point, one could proceed directly west, and crossing the plain over which the buffalo had stampeded, reach the lower point of the big bend of the Clear Fork, which, from this point, flowed northeast, curving around to the southeast, and on to its junction with Elm Fork.

The Comanches, therefore, by a ten-mile ride, parallel with the latter stream north, and then a gallop of ten miles due west, could reach a fine camping-place on the former; the last half of their trail being chiefly over the hard-trampled ground, passed over by the stampeding bison, and by no means easy to follow.

This being the safest and most favorable course for the Indians to take, in order that they might reach their temporary village, the old scout felt tolerably certain as to the whereabouts of their next camp.

Consequently he was not a little troubled; for he could not follow them over the plain, after they had left the vicinity of Elm Fork, except at such a distance as to be quite out of their range of vision.

Single-Eye felt therefore that he must keep in the cover of the timber, or else cross the same and the stream, and gallop up on its eastern verge the ten miles referred to; thence across to the western line of the trees, whence he could watch the Indians, making sure as to the direction the latter traveled after the stampeding herd had passed.

To think, and reason, and decide quickly, was a necessity to one following such a life; and Single-Eye, as he urged his horse toward the west at the edge of the bottom timber, gazed northward, to make sure that the Comanches were traveling in the direction he had mapped out as the one they must take.

Greatly to his gratification, he saw the war-party, some two miles from his point of observation, and proceeding as he had supposed they would. So he again crossed the stream, and gained the eastern side of the timber; when, putting Skip-lively to a fast gallop, he headed north, keeping near the line of trees, and feeling sure that he could cover the ten miles, and gain the turn of the stream about the same time with the Indians, if they should turn to the west, as he anticipated their doing.

The old scout was somewhat troubled on one point. The Indian spy had discovered the trail of himself and pard, which had forced him to kill the brave. Not that the death of the spy in question was a cause of regret—just the opposite—but, because the failure of the brave to return would cause the war-party to fear pursuit, and resort to various means in order to defeat all attempts to trail them; besides making them doubly watchful, and more guarded, while in camp.

But, to use his own expression, he had always been successful in "sarcumventin" ther red heathun," so he had little doubts in regard to his ability to rescue the female captive; although he well knew it would be a most difficult matter to evade those who would be sent in pursuit of him to recover the captive. It would, at all events, be a long and perilous road that he would have to travel, even after his mission had been successful.

The fair captive, whoever she might be, Single-Eye reasoned, must have been most terribly frightened at the time of the attack of the war party upon the stage, when perhaps her relatives were slain; and again, at witnessing the only other survivor except herself, lashed to the back of the buffalo. Besides this, there had been the pain and prostration, occasioned by being bound fast to a tree during the night, and to a horse during the day; and being dragged, she knew not where, by a horde of merciless demons, who might, at any moment, decide to halt, and begin the work of torture.

All this was sufficient to drive the strongest woman insane with despair and horror; and Single-Eye knew that his self imposed mission would, from this fact, be all the more difficult and hazardous to carry out.

Not for a moment, however, did he harbor the thought of abandoning his purpose. His deep sympathy for the suffering woman was increased, and his resolve to save her was strengthened, even though, in the attempt, his own life should be sacrificed.

Thus speeding northward, his mind busy upon every detail of his proposed proceedings, the fact occurred to him that the moon would not rise until some two hours after dark. This rejoiced him greatly, for he could therefore cross the range, from Elm Fork to Clear Fork, under cover of the darkness, soon after the Indians had done so; and then, he would have the benefit of the moon to favor his movements within the timber, where he judged the Comanches would be likely to encamp.

It would not be far from sunset when the bend of Elm Fork would be reached. Then, he doubted not, the war-party would turn west, heading for the Clear Fork, and he could act forthwith.

The old scout felt relieved at the thought, and allowed Skip-lively to go at a more moderate lope, eventually reaching a point, within half a mile of the bend. Here, he felt it was prudent to enter the timber, and secure his horse in a thicket, while he stole across the stream for the purpose of reconnoitering.

Much to his surprise, he could see nothing of the war-party in his front, as he peeped from the screen of bushes. Then, as he gazed southward, to his relief, he discovered them proceeding leisurely over the range toward the Clear

Fork; the vast herd of bison having disappeared from view, the Indians being now on the hard-tramped ground over which they had passed in their stampede.

Single-Eye concluded, from the pace at which they traveled, that the Comanches were not as yet alarmed at the non-return of the spy. He decided that, in all probability, the latter had been instructed to remain secreted until a reasonable time should have elapsed, to discover if a detachment of "long-knives" (cavalry) were sent in pursuit of them, when the massacre of the stage-passengers became known at the fort.

The scout was much relieved at this, and he at once led his horse from the east to the west side of Elm Fork, to a small grass-grown opening, to allow the animal to graze until the sun should set and he would decide that it was prudent to start over the plain.

It would be beyond the power of pen to describe the heartrending loathing and dread that possessed the mind of poor Flora Florence, when she regained consciousness and found herself clasped in the arms of a Comanche brave. It would be impossible to imagine the despair that completely overcame her.

At first she could recall nothing of the near past; but when it did come up before her, and the terrible scenes were vividly reproduced in her mind, she felt that she was lost—that there was no hope.

She had seen Will, her noble, handsome, manly Will, either a mangled corpse or a helpless maniac, bound fast upon a frenzied buffalo, amid a sea of terrified brutes of like kind, the thunder of whose hoofs shook the earth; and she knew that, if not dead, he must be in a condition in which death would be welcome as the greatest mercy.

Then, what had she to live for? But it mattered not now. She was doomed—doomed to a fate, the very thought of which caused her brain to burn, as in the very fever of madness.

She was powerless to escape she well knew, so she assumed her senseless condition as before, closing her eyes and striving to reason, to think if, for her mother's sake—that unhappy mother whom she did not remember to have seen, and who must have suffered so much during these long years—Heaven might yet have some mercy in store for her.

These thoughts of her mother caused a revolution in the mind of the tortured girl. She had suffered so intensely that she had reached the boundary line between sanity and madness, and these thoughts alone checked her upon the very verge of lunacy.

Rebelling heart and soul against the injustice and terrible wrongs which had been hers, she now vowed most solemnly that she would escape from the red fiends if, by keeping hope alive in her breast and bracing up her mind against prostrating thoughts, it were possible to do so.

As she made this mental vow, the parting words of poor Will Washburne came to her mind.

The hope that he had striven to give her had been lost sight of in witnessing the merciless cruelty of the Indians toward him; but now, as she thought of his words, that hope was revived.

As he had said, it was only reasonable to suppose that when the coach failed to arrive when due at Fort Phantom Hill, a detachment of troops would be ordered up the stage road and there discover the proofs of the massacre.

Not only would the trail then be discovered, but even the fact that Will had been secured to the buffalo would be found out; for the officer with whom they had traveled to Fort Belknap had explained to them the wonderful sagacity and skill of the Texan trailers and scouts who were in the State and in the employ of the General Government.

So it was still possible that Will might be saved.

Perhaps, indeed, the herd of bison might pass near the military post, in which event he would be discovered, and very possibly rescued from his fearful peril.

Thus the poor girl coolly calculated the bare possibility, in a way that surprised herself.

If the soldiers should pursue the Indians, she might be rescued by their means; but, whether or not, she was resolved to make the effort by herself, though by so doing she might end her life.

Thus on, through the long, tiresome ride, until the night fell on the earth; and, at last, weary and lame, she was passed into the arms of another brave, as the horse stopped, and laid upon a robe beneath the dark shades of the lofty timber.

Bright fires soon began to illumine the wild, weird scene, and the red braves flitted, like fiends from Hades, here and there, within the fire-light, preparing their evening repast.

Poor Flora lay shuddering, as she watched these hideous, paint daubed demons, and the unearthly scene, even without a thought of the dread past and the threatening future, nearly forced her into her former state of despair.

CHAPTER XVII.
PARTNERS IN CRIME.

At the same time that the two scouts were taking leave of each other at the wash-out, two other horsemen were out on the plain, examining the shattered and blackened coach, and the mutilated bodies lying near it.

These were Mart Maxwell and Rand Rogers. Not having been accustomed to such a mode of travel, they had but just arrived from Fort Belknap, with the intention of recovering their life-long victim, and blasting her future as they had her past.

Deep-stained criminals though they both were, they were yet appalled and terrified by the scene before them, which spoke plainer of that fearful deed of blood, of the day previous, than any word could have done.

The bodies of the murdered men were now blackened and swollen by the sun. It was indeed a most horrible sight, and one which none would care to look upon a second time. The two miscreants were at first filled with amazement, not understanding the situation, but merely supposing that the vehicle had broken down; the horses not being visible.

"What, in the name of all that's mysterious, has occurred now?" exclaimed Maxwell, as they drew nearer, and the dead horses and men met their view.

"It is just our luck, Rand, to lose everything in the last game which there is any prospect for us to enter, with anything like a paying amount to be won. This stage has been robbed and the passengers shot. These bandits of the Concho play most desperate games here on the frontier."

"This is not the work of white men, Mart. They don't do business in this way," said Rand, as they reached the coach. "Don't you see the arrows? The Indians have been here, and by Heavens, I tell you we are in great danger."

"This is a wild-goose chase, and we'll lose our lives in it or I'm a liar. I tell you I don't like the looks of things."

"You don't seem interested as to the fate of your future wife, Rand. That 'norther' must have given you the blues."

"You can see for yourself, Mart, that the girl is not among the dead. It would be much better for her, I have no doubt, if she was. Flora Florence is in the power of the Comanches, and the 'jig' is up."

"Nonsense, Rand! That's all boy's talk. You forget that if our plans in connection with Flora are not carried out to the letter, our chances for fingerin' the ducats are slim. In short, our whole future depends upon her becoming your wife."

"And I haven't the remotest idea that she will ever bear that relationship to me; so where is the use of talking such utter nonsense. Do you suppose that we can snatch her from the clutches of the Indians, as you proposed to do from the coach?"

"I tell you, Rand," said the other, "I don't propose to be beaten or balked in this matter. I presume it will not be much more difficult to take the girl from a few arrow-shooting Indians than from a coach full of well-armed white men."

"What I would like to know is, if the man who induced her to leave Shreveport, and escorted her this far, on her way to meet her uncle—if he is among the slain. But there is no way of ascertaining it. We have no idea how the fellow looked; and if he were one of these fearful-looking cadavers, his own mother would not be able to recognize him."

"Well, Mart, I must say you seem to be really growing desperate. Why, our lives are not worth a picayune anywhere a mile from a military station on this cursed border."

"And I'm mighty sure they won't be worth much more inside a military station, if they once got wind of our character and object."

"Just so, Mart. And that fact shows very plainly what simple fools we were to leave civilization. Here we have no safety. If we are seen by red skins, and take refuge in a fort, we are looked upon as suspicious characters, and stand a good show for being strung up to a limb."

"You are awfully bilious to-day, Rand; but you'll soon get over that. You can see there is no such thing as backing out in this business, for you dare not return to Fort Belknap alone, and I don't intend to give up the girl until I see her a cold corpse. It stands to reason that if the Indians had intended to kill her, they would have done the job here, and saved trouble."

"Well, what do you propose to do, Mart? Transform yourself into a scout and trailer at a moment's notice, I suppose?"

"It doesn't take much practice to follow this trail," asserted Maxwell, as he guided his horse along the trampled ground toward Elm Fork.

"And as we need rest and food and water, we'll strike for timber, and there deliberate upon the situation."

"Come on, Rand; all may yet turn out well. One thing, however, is certain. Flora cannot escape from the Indians without assistance, and if you could run in as a daring rescuer, it would help us along greatly."

There was nothing else for Rand Rogers to do but to follow. He was terrified at the bare thought of being left alone. The weird "norther," the silent and solemn plain, the swollen corpses, and the thought of the girl he was in pursuit of now in the hands of the hostile red-men—all these affected the guilty man's mind beyond anything in his experience.

These grand and wide domains of nature were, in his imagination, filled with skulking coverts of savages, whose blood-curdling war-cries he each moment expected to hear. But Rand did not dare reveal the extent of his fears to his companion. It would only have excited his ridicule had he done so, and would in no wise have altered the situation.

He was puzzled not a little by the absence of all show of concern in Mart, for he knew that if their plans in regard to Flora should fail, they would be in a most desperate position, and would be forced into the very lowest walks of crime.

Clearly the only course open to him was to act with his comrade in all things, for he did not dare return to the States without him.

At this point in Rand's meditations, Mart entered the undergrowth; the pre-occupied condition of the mind of the former preventing him from seeing the exact point at which he did so. Urging his horse onward, however, Rand had not proceeded far when, with a wild yell of affright, he drove spurs deep, and plunged madly through the bushes directly against his surprised and alarmed companion.

"What in the fiend's name have you jumped up now, Rand?" he ejaculated. "You had better smother those yells of yours, or you'll have a pack of scalpners down on us presently. What has scared you, man?"

Rand was indeed terribly startled, as his appearance proved; and drawing his revolver, Mart urged his horse into the thicket to the spot at which his pard pointed in silence. A loud laugh soon recalled Rand to his side.

Spurring back again, the latter found that Mart had dismounted, and was examining the object which had occasioned his fright. It was the body of the Comanche spy who had been slain by Single Eye.

"Well," said Mart, with a fresh burst of laughter, "if you are afraid of a dead Indian to that extent, what will you do should you see a live one or a few score of the yelling devils? But here is something in our favor. There are white men in pursuit of that infernal war-party."

"How do you know that?" inquired Rand, quickly.

"A fool ought to know that they don't stab and scalp each other," was the contemptuous rejoinder. "This red was, no doubt, a spy left to watch for pursuers and to warn his fellows, but he has come to grief by the hand of some scout, who is, of course, aware of the massacre and of the capture of Flora."

"A white man is on the trail—possibly more than one—and if the girl should be rescued we must lay for them and win the game in spite of the devil. But, come, let us examine the vicinity and see if we can find out the direction taken by the Indians in the morning. It begins to look encouraging."

"It doesn't take much to encourage you," said Rand; "though I admit that I would rather, two to one, buck against white men than those painted cusses."

"But lead on; I don't want to run over another corpse."

Mart gave another contemptuous laugh and proceeded to the stream. Here they both allowed their horses to drink, and then, passing down along the west bank, soon entered the deserted Comanche camp.

Dismounting and examining the ground, Mart soon found the stakes to which Will Washburne had been secured, as well as the tree to which Flora had been fastened, the bark of which was much chafed. The evidence was abundant that there had been two captives taken from the stage.

"I'll bet my life," said Mart, "that the man who induced Flora to leave the seminary is alive and a captive with her! But it is strange that those two are all who were saved from the massacre."

"One thing we do know; this man, whoever he is, must be well aware of what we are up to. That settles it for him. He must die or we are not safe a moment after we return to the States!"

"Don't you fret yourself, Mart, in regard to our danger in returning; just keep your mind upon present danger," was the somewhat dubious reply.

"For myself, I am satisfied that neither you nor I will ever again walk the pavements of civilization. A terrible doom of some kind awaits us. I am convinced of it. I have dreamed it, and I know our days are few as they have been evil."

"If you don't hush up that sort of bosh and old woman talk, Rand Rogers, hanged if I don't steal away from you when you're asleep and work this thing myself!"

"Then you can work out this pet doom of yours at your option. But I'm on the trail to

stay—live or die. Shake off your womanly whims, I say, and be yourself. If you don't I'll shake you, as sure as death."

This threat seemed to alarm Rand not a little. He began to brace up and to look more like facing the music.

A half hour later their horses were grazing in a secure nook, and the two worthies were snugly rolled in their blankets in a thicket, Rand anxious and wakeful, but Mart sleeping the sleep of the just and immaculate in heart.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RESCUER AND THE RESCUED.

SUPPORTING the young man's head for some time above the surface of the stream, Old Rocky laved his brow with the cool waters, throwing them over the parched lips and into his mouth. Soon he had the satisfaction of seeing the eyes of his patient open slowly, as if by the greatest effort.

The old scout was not a little surprised to find that the man he had saved was so young, and evidently of a high order of intelligence, as well as social standing.

But his appearance, nevertheless, was truly pitiable.

Only a few rags, in the way of clothing, were attached to his limbs, his flesh was blistered, bruised and scratched, and his limbs cut and swollen from the way in which his captors had bound him.

With all this, however, the form of the young man was a perfect model of manly beauty, and Old Rocky was greatly impressed in addition to being filled with the deepest sympathy for him.

Opening his eyes, Will Washburne slowly stared, at first vacantly upward, not yet realizing his condition or position; but soon his features became convulsed with agony, as spasms of pain shot through his body, bringing forcibly back the past in all its horrors.

He now saw that he was in the water, and that a white man was supporting him. That he was a friend was proved by his service and solicitude, but the young man had as yet no power to aid or resist him in what he did.

Soon, however, the slight movements made by him caused the old scout to discontinue casting the water so freely upon him; and, having placed him in as comfortable a position as he could, he said, kindly:

"Don't yer go ter try ter sling gab, er exart yerself, pard; I'll hev yer in O. K. persish an' condish soon es I kin. Yer hes hed a hefty rifle o' onnat'l ridin' shoved onter yer, 'sides some consider'ble other tortur' by ther red scarfifiers; but quick es yer gits stiddy on yer pins, we'll hump ourselves on ther trail."

"Leastwise, I'm ther pilgrim what's so b'llin' over w' pure indig' et ther bellyuns skutin' off w' ther kaliker-kivered female 'oman, what I opines yer knows somethin' bout."

Will strove to speak, but only a gurgling sound escaped from his parched throat, while a convulsive shudder of agony ran through his frame.

"Keep perfec'ly cool," advised the old scout, as he carefully dragged the youth toward the bank. "I see'd ther bull biz from ther bush, an' I knows all. Ef I hadn't, yer wouldn't ba' bin wo'th shucks at sundown. Yer hed a clost call, but yer'll skin through with a leetle care, ef yer ain't too brash."

"Yer needs a hefty supply o' grub an' plenty o' drink. I gin'rally totes a bottle o' p'ison, which 'll come in handy 'bout now, ter put new vim inter yer karkies."

Hastening across the stream, Old Rocky procured an extra shirt of his own, a flask of brandy, and some eatables; filling his canteen, at the stream, as he returned. He then gave Will a strong dose of the brandy, and a drink of water, proceeding to anoint the blistered flesh of his patient with oil, from a bottle which he brought from his saddle-bags. By the time that this had been done, and the wrists and ankles of the young man also attended to, he was able to sit up.

In a few moments, he spoke, in a feeble voice: "May God bless you, my dear friend, for having saved me from a terrible fate, as well as for your more than kind attention and care of me!"

"Thar!" burst out Old Rocky, impatiently; "ef yer can't sling no dif'runt gab from ther, keep yer tongue et rest. I ain't one o' ther sort what 'spects soft sodder lingo, fer doin' my juty, an' I doesn't like it fer nothin'. All I axes, air fer yer ter git 'roun' ter biz, soon es yer kin; fer thar's hefty fun ahead in ther slashin' an' ba'r-tarin' line, er I'm a squaw."

"But, whar in thunderation did yer come from, an' what did yer p'int this-a-way fer? Didn't yer know that ther reds war es thick es bugs in a Greaser's ha'r, 'roun' ther Brazos forks? Does yer know who ther female 'oman air, what war tuck by ther condemned kiote torturers, an' why she war on ther perrarers?"

A deep groan came from Will's lips, as he replied:

"Oh, God, in mercy, spare her! Yes, my friend, I know her, indeed. She is all that I have to care for on earth—my promised wife!"

We were on our way to Fort Phantom Hill, where her uncle is stationed. His name is Captain Florence. Do you know him?"

"Ya-as, I reckon I does! I hev guided his outfits o' soger boyees, a heap o' times, arter red piruts. An' yer asserwates ther 'oman, what's bin tuck from ther stage, air a relation o' ther captain's?"

"Yes, he is her uncle—her father's brother—but her father she has never seen; nor her mother either, since infancy.

"She has been the victim of misfortune and wrong, through life, and was induced by me to seek her uncle, that she might escape from one who has been planning to ruin her for life. Little did we dream that we were hastening to still greater dangers.

"However, I will save her, or leave my bones on the border. Do you suppose that the Indians will torture her, or murder her at once? If so, my life will be spent in killing red-skins. I'll live only for vengeance!"

"That's 'bout ther way to talk hit, pard," said the old scout. "Es ter ther gal bein' tortured, er slashed into kingdom come, hit won't be did at onc't, er they'd hed thar biz done 'fore they skuted up ther country.

"I hes a pard on ther trail arter her, an' though he's gut only one peeper, he'll make thet do hefty biz, an' watch out fer chances ter help ther 'oman ontel we j'ines him. What's yer handle?"

"My name is William Washburne. That of the lady is Flora Florence. But, tell me what I am to do first. Where am I to procure a horse and arms?"

"Dang'd ef I thought o' thet!" exclaimed Old Rocky, in surprise and self-condemnation. "I swan ter Cristy, I war thinkin' o' cuttin' 'cross ter ther head o' ther Clear Fork, strikin' thar ahead o' ther reds; but hit 'ud be a soft thing ter 'spect yer ter glide thar afoot. Come ter 'member, my pard sent a red hellyun a-bilin' offen this hyer yearth, back yonder, an' he must 'a' hed a nag bid in ther bush somewhar.

"Reckon we 'uns hes got ter levant thet-a-way, an' see what we kin see; though Single-Eye—thet's my pard's cog—will 'spect me 'long Clear-Fork-way.

"Does yer s'pose yer kin keep a-straddle my critter by holdin' on ter ther saddle-born while we glides down crick, ter whar ther reds hed yer staked out las' night?"

"I must do something," said Will; "I shall go insane if I remain inactive. Suffering though I am, I shall try to bear it, and do all I can to follow the inhuman fiends. Oh, if I could only believe that my darling may be strong enough to bear up, under her dread and terrible condition!"

With these words, making an almost superhuman effort, Will grasped the overhanging limb of a tree, and managed gradually, after much agony, to regain the use of his muscles; the stiffness and numbness wearing off with a freer circulation. Before this, however, the old scout had crossed the stream, soon returning, leading his horse, and greatly rejoiced at seeing the young man upon his feet.

"That's ther way ter proceed, pard Will," he said; "an' I'm incernated ter persume thet we'll make some o' ther red heathen gi'n thar las' yell afore we p'int back towards ther stage-trail.

"But I reckon I'll be 'bleeged to gi'n yer one o' my 'sides.' Howsomer, I'm a boss knife-tosser, when I gits my hyderphobic up, an' kin carve some on 'em, 'sides makin' my 't'other 'sides' do double biz. Jist chuck a big feed o' buffler-meat and corn pone inter yer stumjacket, an' then we'll skute towards sun-up-way; though I hates ter stomp grass myself, bein' allers used ter straddlin' nags. But I reckon we'll pick up a critter somewhars."

"I hope so, indeed," said the young man, as he began to obey the old scout's instructions in regard to eating, but he found it difficult to do so.

The agony he had undergone, mentally and physically, banished all taste and longing for food.

"Will you kindly reveal your name," he now asked, "to one who owes his life to you?"

"I'm knowed es 'Old Rocky,'" said the scout; "a hard handle, which some folkses thinks kinder onproperit; fer my ole heart ain't es hard es my name, by a jug-full."

"I should judge not, my friend; and I'm extremely proud to owe my life to such a noted borderman.

"I was told much about your daring bravery and frontier service while we were at Fort Belknap, and on the way to that post, by an army officer—Captain Williams, of the Eighth Infantry—and also much concerning Single-Eye, the pard you have mentioned. It gives me great relief to learn from you that he is on the trail of the war-party. How I wish that Flora could know that he is watching for an opportunity to save her!"

"He ain't ther sort o' pilgrim ter stan' an' see her tortured, even ef he hed ter take a run through 'em, plum erlone," asserted Old Rocky, as he secured his saddle-bags and tricks in their places, and assisted Will into the saddle, the young man setting his teeth as he did so, and

crushing down the agony that the movement occasioned.

Clinging to the horn of the saddle, and feeling that he was, each moment, regaining his strength, and the use of his limbs, Will rode on, the old scout leading the horse clear from the timber, from which, in five minutes more, they emerged.

Thence they proceeded eastward, toward the place at which Old Rocky had parted from Single-Eye.

It was about this very time that Mart Maxwell and Rand Rogers rolled themselves in their blankets, and lay down to court the drowsy god, after having inspected the deserted camp of the Comanches.

There the two miscreants lay, but a little distance from the "wash-out," in which the two scouts had taken refuge during the "norther," and which Old Rocky and Will Washburne now slowly approached.

The former cautioned the young man, in a low tone, to be silent, fearing the very possible presence of some sneaking spies, sent back by the Comanches; but the caution, in Will's case, was quite unnecessary.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CAITIFFS CORRALED.

"I'll fetch yer inter a cosey place," said Old Rocky, reassuringly, to his companion; "an' then sashay 'roun' ter see ef I kin find ther nag o' thet dead hellyun, fer I'm ormighty sartain thet he warn't calkerlatin' ter frog hit ter ther Clear Fork."

Will Washburne had no idea of hindering, or interfering with the old scout in any way. Not only this; but he realized his own helplessness, and felt it keenly. He had been placed *hors du combat* by the torture he had undergone at the hands of the Comanches, and, in addition, he was without a horse, and unarmed.

Should his friend and preserver be unsuccessful in procuring a horse, Will now felt that he must be content to remain behind, suffering anguish of mind, as well as body; which would be lost sight of, to a great extent, were he but in chase of the inhuman fiends who had Flora Florence in their power.

While this painful thought possessed him, as he passed through a patch of moonlight, he caught sight of the tail of a horse, as it flew upward, as if whisking off flies. He was about to call out after Old Rocky, and reveal his discovery, when it suddenly occurred to him that possibly the horse belonged to some Indian, who had returned in search of the spy that had been killed. In any event, Will felt rejoiced that a horse could here be secured for him; so, in silence, he leaned forward, regardless of the pain that he felt, and catching the lariat of the old scout's steed near the neck, gave it a jerk. This caused Old Rocky, who held the opposite end in his hand, to halt, and look around him in surprise.

He soon saw that Will had either discovered danger, or else had been seized with such agony that a halt was necessary. As he reached the side of the young man, quickly and silently, Will whispered:

"There is a horse, not fifty yards from our position. I saw his tail in motion, in the moonlight."

"Dang my cats!" said the old man, in astonishment. "Ef yer see'd a critter that-a-way, hit means mischief, dead sure an' sartain; fer me an' my pard war all 'long thar, arter ther red war laid out cold."

"Thar must be some sneakin' red scum 'roved since I skuted arter yer. Jist slide offen ther nag, soon es I git inter this hyer 'wash-out,' an' lay low ontel I glides back."

The next moment the old scout made his way in the direction of the deserted Indian camp, moving stealthily; while the horse remained in the dark shadows, and Will was seated near the mouth of the gorge.

The anxiety of the young man may be imagined; for, should the old scout be slain, he, in his helpless condition, would be butchered like a dog.

With the utmost caution, crawling from thicket to thicket, Old Rocky made his way; and soon came to a point where, on the soft soil of the bottom, he could hear plainly the stamping of horses' hoofs.

In a few moments, he was able to peep from a thicket, when he perceived two horses in the moonlight. The animals were fastened by lariats to bushes on either side of a small opening; and, to the great relief of the old scout, he saw at once that they did not belong to Indians, but to white men, as they were fine fresh stock—evidently half-breeds. The fact, that they were tied with grass ropes, was even more conclusive proof of this. But, another discovery awaited him.

As he proceeded still further down-stream, Old Rocky perceived what he had really expected. Two men, their saddles lying at some distance from them, were rolled in their blankets, and apparently in deep slumber.

A moment's reflection convinced him that the men whom he saw were white, and moreover, that they were unaccustomed to frontier life;

decidedly green, and dangerously imprudent. This was obvious, from the fact that they did not use their saddles for pillows, and that their rifles were leaning against some bushes at least four feet from them.

Men must be fresh on the frontier indeed, who would thus stake their animals where any one passing up or down stream could see them. With this conclusion, came to the scout a suspicion that they were not honest men. Had they been so, they would surely have gone into Fort Phantom Hill, where they could have passed the night without any apprehension. This was pretty positive; and, most assuredly, they were neither scouts, rangers, nor rancheros.

Without hesitancy, then, Old Rocky decided that he would appropriate one of the horses, with the necessary equipments, for his new pard.

There was ample excuse for this. To follow the Indian trail at once was imperative. The life of a young and lovely maiden depended upon haste in the matter; so the old scout was determined to lose no time. It was but a moment's work to secure the animal; and, to the great joy of Will, he at once led him to the "wash-out," saying as he came up:

"Squat right hyer, pard, an' keep yer gaze toward ther crick. I'm a-goin' ter gi'n a couple o' tenderfeet a stompede scare. Thar ain't no reds 'round, er ther two gerloots would ha' lost thar ha'r long ago."

He then disappeared before Will could say a word in reply.

Leading the remaining horse over the stream, the old scout secreted the animal, and then crawled into the thicket where the two men slept. Creeping up stealthily, he succeeded in removing the belt containing revolver and bowie-knife, from one of them, as it lay near his head. This done, Old Rocky stole back some ten feet nearer the deserted Indian camp, when, picking up a section of the dead limb of a tree, he threw it with great force into the thicket where the two men slept. As he did so, he gave out a series of yells; quickly after, casting other pieces of deadwood in all directions.

In terror and dread both sleepers bounded to their feet; Rand Rogers dashing up-stream as if all the fiends in Hades were pursuing him, and Mart Maxwell, by no means slow to follow him.

The latter was but half-awake; and the yells and crashing among the bushes were painfully suggestive of Indians. So terrified were the pair that they did not notice that their horses were gone.

At headlong speed they rushed past the mouth of the "wash-out," where Will crouched; both casting back glances of horror and dread. Their slumbers, owing to past fatigue, had been deep; and so suddenly and alarmingly had they been awakened, that they were now bewildered and overpowered with terror.

This was increased by the recollection that they had laid down to sleep in the vicinity of a deserted Indian camp, and also their having stumbled upon the dead brave just previously to their doing so. Not the least doubt had they in regard to the great peril that must now threaten them. They fully believed that a large force of Indians was rushing upon them; hence their headlong flight and utter forgetfulness of their horses and arms.

Up the stream, the two affrighted ruffians ran, and past the head of the "wash-out," where Will Washburne had been left by the old scout.

As they thus dashed on, they sprang across a patch of moonlight which fully revealed their faces to the young man, who, at the commencement of the tumult, had crawled nearer to the mouth of the "wash-out" for the purpose of inspecting the bottom timber down the creek, in order that he might, if possible, ascertain what had occurred.

Following the crashing of the bushes, Will saw the two men bounding, as if for dear life, past the "wash-out," and up stream, directly through the patch of moonlight. He saw, and recognized!

There could be no mistake. The fiendish face of Mart Maxwell was plainly revealed; and the unaccountable vision almost took Will's breath away. Up through the undergrowth went the fugitive, at the heels of another; who, being a stranger, claimed the attention that had been caught by the sight of the Missouri miscreant. Will Washburne sunk backward, the most astonished man in Texas.

The situation was easily explained. Beyond a doubt, Maxwell, upon arriving at Shreveport, and ascertaining the flight of his ward, had employed every means within his power to trace the course she had taken; and with most astonishing success.

The presence of the villain on this remote border, well proved his desperate character, and his determination to carry out his infamous plot.

His accomplice was, doubtless, the same man, Will inferred, with whom he had heard him conversing in New Orleans; and who, it had been arranged, was to marry Flora Florence, and thus secure for the pair, the remaining portion of her fortune.

Matters were becoming still more complicated.

Should Flora now be rescued from the Comanches, she would still be in danger from the desperate ruffian, who had murdered her father, driven her mother to insanity, herself to obscure orphanage, and squandered her inheritance.

Gaining his feet, by a great effort, Will staggered forward; but was met by Old Rocky, who rushed against him, filling the air with his unearthly whoops and yells. These changed to uncontrollable laughter, as he caught hold of the young man, and pulled him back into the "wash-out."

"Dang my dog-gone ole heart!" cried out the scout, as soon as he could suppress his laughter. "I never had sich a heap o' fun, in so danged short a flicker o' time afore. Thar's two tenderbuffs started fer ther head o' Elm Fork, on a cyclone stompede; an' they won't stop, I don't reckon, untill sun-up, er they gits out o' breathe."

"Pard Will, I bes cabbidged a 'six,' an' a bowie, an' a fust-class nag, with 'quipments."

"Hit war a proverential 'rangement, that we 'uns levanted this-a-ways; though bit warn't much thet a-way fer ther tenderbuffs, though I'm jist a bettin' heavy they ain't plum'-up an' down squar' an' white humans, an' I mos' knows hit."

There had been no chance for Will to put in a word until Old Rocky ceased speaking. Then he surprised his old friend, by bursting out:

"You have, indeed, been fortunate, my friend, and have done a great service to me in more ways than one. Those men are assassins—villains of the blackest dye—and they are here in pursuit of the poor girl, who is now in the power of the Indians."

"My only regret is that you did not shoot them both. However, as you have saved my life, and we are to be pardons in the attempt to rescue Flora, I will give you a history of the wrongs planned, and those already done, by the men whom you have just driven up-stream."

Then the young man proceeded to relate all the facts connected with the life of Flora Florence as they had become known to himself.

The old scout was now furious with rage and regret. Had he but known these facts in regard to the two ruffians he would have shot them in their tracks. Pursuit, however, was now useless.

Still the two wretches, being without their arms and horses, were now helpless, and unable to travel in any direction. There was some consolation in this.

"We've got 'em corral'd, Will," said Old Rocky; "an' we kin run 'em outen ther bush, an' then h'ist 'em up a limb. We'll do hit, too, when we gits Flory outen ther clutches o' ther red beathen!"

More confident and hopeful now, and with a fresh and well-equipped horse under him, Will followed the old scout down Elm Fork, north-erly and toward the point where Single-Eye had waited for the darkness to screen his advance over the plain after the Comanche war-party.

Leading the horse of Rand Rogers and chuckling as he went at the manner in which he had "sarcumvented ther condemned kioties what made war on weemin an' leetle gals in ther States," Old Rocky set out on the trail of the Comanches.

CHAPTER XX.

"SUCH MEASURE AS YE METE."

FOR at least half a mile from the spot from which they had sprung in affright, Mart Maxwell and Rand Rogers did not pause for a moment.

The latter would have kept on even then had not Mart, gaining his side, grasped him by the shoulder and hurled him to the earth. Mart was furious, but for the time was unable to vent his wrath in words.

Turn and scratched, the blood streaming from every exposed portion of their flesh from contact with the thorny undergrowth, the two men presented a pitiable sight, if pity could be felt for such.

At last Mart spoke, in a fierce and angry voice:

"Why, in the fiend's name, did you run out of our camp? Are you going mad, Rand Rogers?"

Still panting, his face contorted with horror, Rand bent his gaze at these words upon his companion in crime in the utmost surprise and bewilderment. At length he, too, found voice.

"What do you mean, Mart Maxwell? I'll ask you the same question. Why did you rush from the camp, as if the ghosts of Frank Florence and all your other victims was after you?"

The wretch was furious, but, realizing the folly of quarreling with the only man he knew for hundreds of miles, he crushed down the feeling, and even endeavored to turn it into a jest.

"Rand Rogers, do you pretend to say that you don't know why I was running?"

"I pretend no such absurdity. I know very well that you were running to escape those infernal red-skins; and you are a fool now, for lingering here. What did you jerk me to the ground in that manner for? I'm all shook up."

"You're a poor kind of a pard to travel with in this country, Rand. I've been running to catch you, and nothing else. You don't mean to say that you thought I was frightened at the yell of a single red-skin, prowling around to steal our horses, which he'll do, I dare say, if he can find them. You're a nice one!"

"Come back! I don't want you to desert me in that way again. It's evident you have lost your 'sand' somehow. You're not the same man you were before you were put in the 'jug.'"

Rand looked at Mart in astonishment.

He could not contradict him. He was obliged to believe that he spoke true, or partly so. He began to think that probably his comrade would have stood his ground, had he himself not darted away at the moment of alarm.

Being now afraid to remain alone, Rand followed Mart on the back trail, the latter having turned back, in a reckless manner, toward the camp.

Washing the blood from their hands and faces, when they reached the stream, they went on stealthily down-stream; Mart in advance, and keeping well in the undergrowth. In this way, they reached the place where they had left their horses.

The animals, as we know, were gone; but Mart did not dare vent his intense anger in words, as he feared the near presence of the foe.

In a few minutes the startled pair entered the thicket where they had been asleep, but there were no indications of their former presence. Saddles, bridles, blankets, all had disappeared; yet they prudently refrained from commenting on the circumstance. For a few moments, they stood silent, listening intently, but not a sound reached them. All was still as death.

The patches of moonlight, there and there, gave the wood a weird, and almost unearthly appearance, and impressed the discomfited villains with a sense of some coming danger. On all sides of them, they seemed to see only hiding-places for the merciless Comanches.

Twitching the arm of Rand, Mart stole back in the direction of the "wash-out," his companion following him.

In a few moments, they reached the same, and crawled along its bed, for some distance; when, of a sudden, Mart burst into a volley of oaths, his voice trembling with the intensity of his rage at dury.

"By all the fiends!" he exclaimed, as he threw himself against the bank, in the darkness. "I shall burst a blood-vessel with madness. We're in a pretty fix now, I must say! Out on the wild border, without horses, food, or ammunition!"

"Satan! Why did we not show more sense, and one of us keep guard, while the other slept?"

"But it would have been just the same, I reckon; for if you had been on watch, you'd have run and left me to have my head skinned when I was asleep."

"What in the imp's name do you suppose we are to do now? Have you had all the few ideas you ever had frightened clean out of your head?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Rand replied, "what we are to do. We can't walk—that's certain! In short, we are gone up for good, Mart. That girl has led us to our doom. Retribution is on our trail. Our luck is gone; our race is run!"

"If you hadn't run that race of yours—confound you!—we'd have been O. K. and could have started in the morning on the trail of the girl. I don't belong to a faint-hearted family myself, and failure and despondency are words that I have long since blotted from my vocabulary."

"But one thing we can do, and need to do, and that is sleep. For myself, I shall most assuredly indulge in it, and daylight may brighten our affairs in every way."

"I don't think I can sleep another wink," said Rand dubiously; "in fact, I know I cannot. The situation is too perilous to think of such a thing."

"As to Flora Florence, I have no doubt the reds have tortured her before this, so that puts an end to all our plans as far as she is concerned."

"Take my advice and go to sleep," advised Mart. "Sleep is what you need to bring you around natural. Then you'll see clearer what our chances are, and have less fear as to our personal safety. I told you that white men were on the trail of the Indians. If they rescue Flora, we will take her from them or die trying. She is our only hope. But go to sleep now, and dream of success."

With these words, Mart Maxwell turned on his side, and his heavy breathing soon proved that he had acted on his own suggestion. His pard fought against somnolence for some time, but eventually succumbed, and both villains slumbered for the time.

Scarce half an hour later, Old Rocky and Will Washburne having been all this time on their way down Elm Fork, half a dozen Comanche braves dashed down over the west plain toward their former encampment; slackening the

gait of their horses as they approached the timber, which they entered in a stealthy manner, all dismounting except one, to whom the jaw-strings of the ponies were passed. The remaining five then hastened up the stream, along the buffalo trail.

When the moonlight enabled the braves to study the "sign" in the soft clay, guttural grunts of surprise were audible, and they hastened on over the creek toward the eastern verge of the timber.

It was not long before a vengeful ejaculation, followed by a low howl, came from the foremost, as the scalped spy—their comrade—met their view.

They all gathered around the mutilated corpse, but it was not long that they thus stood. Soon all except one glided toward the creek again, at an order from him who remained, and began to examine every thicket and the ground wherever it was illuminated by the moon.

At last, a brave came up, leading the wild, snorting steed of the slain Indian, which, he had found, where it had been secured in the dense shades. Then the corpse was lifted to the back of the animal, and there lashed, a most hideous and revolting load. Barely had this been done, when a bird-like whistle sounded from beyond Elm Fork, which caused the two warriors to straighten erect, and utter grunts of exultant joy.

A low order, and a number of signs to the other, were now given by the leader; who then sprung down the path in the direction of the stream, leaving the other to follow.

He was soon brought to a halt, by a hiss from an adjacent thicket; after entering which he re-appeared with one of the braves, who conducted him directly to the "wash-out."

There, they stood for a moment, to accustom themselves to the darkness; when they perceived the two sleeping white men. A series of quick signs and motions were sufficient, on making this gratifying discovery, to make the wishes of the sub-chief known to his braves.

Another hiss, in the awful silence, was the signal.

As it reached their ears, all bounded upon the sleeping whites; a brave grasping each, an arm of both.

A yell of mortal terror burst from Mart and Rand, thus suddenly awakened; but they were jerked to their feet on the instant, and forced out into the moonlight, on the bank of Elm Fork. Here, all bewilderment was soon banished by the sight of their terrible surroundings.

An arm of each was held, in a vise-like grip, by a hideous Comanche, their long knives glittering in the moon, while a fifth Indian, with drawn knife also, stood in their front, an image of the fate that awaited them.

After the first sudden cry of alarm, the two wretches were struck dumb, by the realization of their terrible position. Thus they stood, supported by the red braves; their own strength banished by their abject terror.

Then, down upon them, snorting with frenzied fear, came the steed of the slain spy, with its dread burden. This sight increased the terror of Mart and Rand; and all the reckless daring of the former at once left him.

They saw that the Indians laid the slaying of their comrade at their door; and any denial or explanation would have been useless. The Comanches now lost no time. The arms of the two men were bound behind them; and, in five minutes, the warriors were all mounted, and forcing their captives, with yells of terror and pain, into a half-run toward the Clear Fork.

From the breasts of the two white miscreants, all hope had now flown. That their criminal career was near an end, neither of them for a moment doubted; but such was their deathly terror and dread, at that instantaneous transformation, from profound slumber and apparent safety, to dumfounded terror and despair, that, as they were lashed on by the painted braves, not a word did the one speak to the other.

Each communed, as well he might, with his own guilty, debased self; and nothing but torture, both here and hereafter, was presented to their crime-stained souls.

They were setting out on the hard way, which every transgressor, sooner or later, must travel.

CHAPTER XXI.

"TOLLING, REJOICING, SORROWING."

IT has been stated that Old Rocky and Will Washburne had been half an hour on their way down Elm Fork before the Comanches entered the deserted camp and captured the ruffian persecutors of Flora Florence.

They had proceeded about two miles in the winding buffalo-path of the Elm Fork bottom timber, when suddenly, upon taking a sweeping glance through the branches, the old scout called quickly to Will:

"Dang my cat's kittens! Ef thar ain't a leetle surprise party fer ther condemned skunks what I skeered nigh outen thar butes, I'm a puserlanious pervaricator!"

"What do you mean, friend Rocky?" inquired Will.

"Jist gi'n yer peepers a rove 'long ther per-

rarer, 'bout sou'west, an' yer'll see a half-dozen red hellyuns skutin' toward timmer, aimin' ter strike ther las' night's camp. We-uns glided outen thar 'bout ther right time ter git counted out o' a lively leetle circus.

"Ef they'd 'a' run in on me in a bunch, when I war tryin' ter fix yer up fer ther trail, I mought ha' gut scarified, an' hed my head skinned, years an' all!"

"I see the red fiends," said Will, grating his teeth, "and I wish I was my own natural self at this moment."

"Would yer lunge out on 'em, chuck-full o' pure hydrophobic?"

"I should not hesitate a moment," answered the young man.

"An' thar's whar yer'd make a miss, pard Will. They'd kerral yer, sure an' sartain, an' take yer in outen ther wet. Yer hes gut ter lay low an' fight reds ther same way as they fight the'rselves. Hit wouldn't do fer us ter skute out arter 'em, even ef yer war in good condish. 'Cos why? They'd some on 'em git erway from us an' sp'ile futur' biz."

"Ef I war erlone now, I'd skute down ther timmer an' lay fer chances ter run a knife inter one et er time; an' et ther last end, draw shooter an' sen' ther t'others ter grass. Howsomever, we-uns hain't gut no call ter fool wi' side-trails. Hit 'ud mebbe so lose our chances fer gittin' Flory outen Rollin' Thunder's clutches. Does yer feel a leetle more peart?"

"Yer better take ernuther soak in Elm Fork arter we-uns gits ter ther bend. Thar ain't nothin' better fer soreness an' stiffness then cold water an' grease."

"I feel stronger, thank you," was the reply, "and I am only eager to proceed. In fact I am more tortured now in mind than in body. Shall we proceed on our course?"

"Don't fret, pard Will! Thar ain't no hurry, an' we-uns can't cross ther plain until ther pesky red sculpers yunder hes skuted toward ther Cl'ar Fork ahead o' us."

"You don't mean to say that we must wait here for hours, perhaps all night, until those braves go back? How do you know that they intend to return? I don't understand it—they seemed to have doubled on their trail."

"I reckon hit air kinder smooky ter yer, Will, but hit air plain 'nough ter me. Yer see, ther red skunk what my pard sent ter kingdom come war lef' fer a spy, an' es he didn't show up, they hes come ter 'vestergate hit."

"Ef ther gerloots what I skeered air blamed fools 'nough ter crawl back ter try an' find thar nags, I'm opinin' they'll git scooped in by ther red scarifyers. They won't linger long, fer they'll mighty soon find ther dead spy, an' I reckon hit'll pay ter hang out hyer until thar's a change o' deals. I'm a-goin' ter take a suck et my ole corn-cob, fer hit's a len'thy string o' periuds since I hes hed a whiff o' smoke."

"Of course you know best, my friend," said Will; "although the delay is agony to me, I can but agree to your mode of operations. But you must excuse my impatience. Every moment of suspense is terrible to me."

"I understand all thet," said Old Rocky, lighting his pipe as he spoke; "but es I sed afore, yer can't sarcumvent Injuns without goin' slow an' easy, an' studyin' ther persish o' things es yer glides. Ef yer too brash, ye're boun' ter lose ha'r. Hit won't be long now 'fore we'll see ther painted cusses galivantin' over ther perrarer ag'in, wi' ther corpus o' ther pard with his head skinned."

Will curbed his impatience and remained upon his horse.

Not long was he thus on the watch when he saw the red warriors emerge from the shades, and he called to the old scout, who, gazing up the stream, exclaimed:

"Dog gone my ole heart! I thought hit 'ud pan out thet-a-way. Ther heathens hev done a good job fer yer."

"What do you mean, friend Rocky?"

"I means thet they hes gut ther two white piruts what I skeered, an' they'd better say thar 'now I lay me's,' fer they hain't gut long ter linger on this ball o' dirt."

"They hes gut ther dead spy outen his boss, an' ther two States piruts air a-gittin' a taste o' what's a-comin' arter they gi'ns thar las' kick, an' ther ole boy slings 'em inter ther big brimstun bake-oven."

"I thought there was an addition to the party," said Will, "and I now see that you are right."

"Fate has at last overtaken those villainous plotters. That sight cheers me and gives me new hope. The ruffians are in a fair way to be swept from the earth. But must we wait now until those Comanches are brought beyond the limit of vision on the moonlit plain before we can proceed further?"

"Thet air gut ter be did, Will; but don't git on a stompede. I'll hev this job runnin' more smooth purty soon. I wanted ter lay fer ther white cusses an' wipe 'em out; but hit 'ud bin losin' time. Es hit air, everything's bin kinder engineered fer ther good o' all consarned in ther p'ints what's squar'."

"Ther scarifyers air a playin' right inter our han's, takin' some dirty biz from we-uns, though I lankers ter jark a rope on ther condemned

kiotes what's playin' ag'in' thet leetle gal. I reckon we kin glide down crick 'bout now, pard Will, though I opines thet Single Eye air way nigh outen ther Cl'ar Fork afore this."

"Then ag'in, come ter think, hit may be thet he war kep' back by ther varmint's yunder, what hes rid from prob'ly 'bout half-way on ther perrarer. Ef ther moon war up when they started, hit 'ud gi'n 'em a show ter see Single-Eye, though he air cute 'nough ter play roots on 'em by gittin' Skip ter lay flat on ther grass. Thet Skip air a boss what air a boss!"

As he spoke, the old scout urged his animal down the stream, followed by Will, and feeling confident that the trail was clear from all lurkers.

"Your pard is a peculiar man, and has a peculiar name; also a horse, different, I judge, from the general run of such animals."

"Thet's whar ye're kerrect all 'roun'. He hes er name what's purty properit, es yer 'll asser-vate when yer sees him; fer he hain't gut but one peeper—he an' his critter hes only gut a pa'r atween 'em."

"Howsomever, thar can't a red ant cross er trail 'thout my pard an' his nag both gittin' in a hefty gaze outen hit. Thet hoss hes shook ther cussedness an' yell outen many a Cormanch', Pache, an' Kiowa. Ef he gits one 'tween his jaws, hit's 'good-by, Mr. Injun,' wi'out a death-song. Skip' air wo'th a half-dozen men on er trail."

"You astonish me. I am anxious to see Single-Eye. I have heard of him, but did not know that his name was so strikingly fitted to the man, or that he had such a peculiar and most valuable beast."

"I sincerely hope that the small war-party, in returning, did not discover him. You do not think it possible, friend Rocky, that they may have seen him, and shot him, do you?"

The old scout lay back in his saddle, and laughed long and heartily, ere he replied.

"Dangnation, Will! 'Scuse me fer 'splodin' right out, wi' ole he laugh, but hit's too ormigh-ty good er joke. Why, pard Will, when a red gits ther dead wood on Single-Eye an' Skip-lively—er a hull war-party, fer thet matter—then ther 'Merican peoples better gi'n up tryin' ter settle ther frontiers."

"Ef I sh'ud see my pard laid out cold wi' his head skinned, I sh'ud say 'now I lay me,' curl myself up, flop over, an' make er die o' hit; fer I should think ther worl' war come ter an eend."

"Then you think him invincible?"

"Doesn't know what thet air; but he's able ter take keer o' his own ha'r, an' he hes saved a heap o' humans from losin' thar'n. When he gits b'illin' over wi' mad, he's a ragin', roarin' tornader; wuss nor a norther, yer kin gamble."

"I wouldn't be so dang'd keerless an' uncon-sarned on this hyer trail, ef he warn't on ahead. Ef we-uns hedn't hed ter levant back arter a boss fer yer ter straddle, we c'ud 'a' cut 'cross country, ter ther head o' the Cl'ar Fork, an' laid low until ther reds come erlong; er else glided down-stream, an' tuck a hand wi' Single-Eye."

"Es 'tis, we-uns hes gut a risky ride, an' must strike fer a pint, some consider'ble ways 'bove ther place, whar I opine ther reds 'll camp, an' then skute up ther timmer."

"Hit's 'bout es light es day on ther plain, an' they'd skupe us in, ef we'd 'low 'em ter git er peep et us."

As they rode on, conversing in this strain, Old Rocky and Will Washburne eventually reached the very point, at the bend in Elm Fork, where Single-Eye had allowed Skip-lively to graze, and where, securely hidden from view, he had seen the Comanche war-party change their course westward, in the direction of the Clear Fork of the Brazos.

But they made no delay here. The old scout urged his horse from the undergrowth into the bright moonlight, and then started out over the prairie, on a course north of west, in order to strike the Clear Fork some distance above the point where he calculated the Indians would encamp.

By this he would prevent observation; and, upon reaching the timber, they could proceed under cover of the same up-stream, to the very verge of the Comanche encampment with perfect safety.

The little party that had captured Mart Maxwell and Rand Rogers were not within view, they having passed afar over the prairie, in a direction that proved to the old scout that his idea as to the location of the camp of the war-party had been the correct one.

Gazing ahead over the plain, as if he would pierce the distance, and endeavor to discover the whereabouts and condition of the girl whom he so idolized, Will Washburne followed Old Rocky, the latter leading the horse of Mart Maxwell, which he had appropriated, and traveling on, feeling tolerably comfortable in the inward assurance that his pard, Single-Eye, was in some way bringing everything outright.

CHAPTER XXII.

TURTLE, THE TONKAWAY.

"SKIP," said Single-Eye, springing into his saddle, as the prairie became shrouded in the

gloom of night, "I wants yer ter make yer huffs fly like a Gov'ment mule wi' a section o' prickly pears under hit's tail."

The horse, as if understanding, shook his head, and as the scout slackened bridle-rein, pointed his nose forward, his head in a line with his back, and went skimming over the plain at great speed.

Two hours later the moon rose, and the horse and his rider plunged into the undergrowth beneath the timber of the Clear Fork, and about two miles north of the Comanche camp. Here, springing quickly to the earth, Single-Eye patted his steed lovingly, and led the animal forward to a small natural "open."

There, loosening the saddle-girth, and removing the bridle, with a farewell word to Skip-lively, Single-Eye, with great caution, stole on up the stream.

Making his way to the edge of the timber, he climbed a tree, from the outer branches of which he hoped to ascertain the exact position of the Indian encampment.

Greatly to his surprise, not a single animal was visible; but he soon came to the conclusion that, for prudent reasons, the ponies had been taken to the opposite side of the river—the point less liable to attack, and from which the course was open toward the hunting-camp of the remainder of that branch of the Comanche tribe.

The fires had been allowed to die down, but the light of the moon made it all the more perilous on that account for the scout to venture on; nevertheless Single-Eye resolved to advance.

He well knew that, if he should come suddenly upon a sentinel, and did not on the instant plunge his knife into the breast of the savage, at the same time preventing the death-yell, all was lost. Not only so; but, from the fact that they would infer that but one enemy was in the bottom, they would at once decide, that his object must be the liberation of the captive maiden, and they would at once take measures to make that impossible.

Everything, therefore, depended upon his caution.

It was not the first time, however, by many, that he had been in the same situation. But he made frequent halts, and listened intently, as yet discovering nothing. He was careful to make his way through the darkest places, avoiding the patches and spots of moonlight, which would at once betray his presence.

In this way, considerable time was consumed before Single-Eye reached the Comanche camp; and when, at last, the old scout peeped out from a thicket, and saw the glow of a smoldering fire within ten feet of him, he felt greatly relieved, for he knew that he had passed the line of sentinels.

Still scrutinizing the ground, the scout saw several braves near the fire, all apparently sleeping soundly after the fatigue of the day.

He now determined to make a circuit of the camp, in order to discover, if possible, the fair captive. This was hazardous in the extreme, but Single-Eye had made his plans for his own escape, in the event of his being discovered.

He would dash at full speed through the undergrowth to the river, plunge in, and swim down with the current to the vicinity of his horse.

Should he discover the maiden, he decided that he would, in some way, let her know that a friend was near; though no plan for her rescue had as yet occurred to him.

Climbing the nearest tree, he made his way into another, by the interlocked limbs, and thence on, in the same manner, until he reached a tree, beneath which, and secured to the trunk, was the woman he had seen taken from the coach.

He knew nothing of this captive, as yet; whether old or young, beautiful or the reverse—he only knew that a woman was there, and doomed to a terrible death. Knowing this, he stole carefully downward, until upon the lower branches of the tree; then he clutched at the bough in his hands, in his astonishment, for the angelic face of Flora Florence was before him.

Pallid, but with an unearthly beauty, as she gazed upon the silvery Queen of Night that seemed to have sought her out amid the dark shades, to dart a ray of hope into her heart, the maiden thus appeared in the midst of this weird scene.

But soon, as the old scout gazed, the fair young face changed its expression, and a look of terror and despair was pictured upon it, that wrung the soul of Single-Eye with pity; and he took a mental oath that she should be saved, if he was forced to follow the war-party to the Staked Plains by himself.

Knowing that the gleam of moonlight, by which he had discovered the maiden, would soon change to another spot, the scout proceeded to carry out his plan. Taking a bullet from his pouch, as he gained the lowermost limb, he dropped it with great care into the lap of the captive girl. He saw that she was startled, and he felt that she would try to ascertain what had thus fallen.

He was not mistaken. Soon, to his joy, he perceived that the maiden had taken up the bullet, and was examining it.

Now, to his delight, he saw an expression of hope lighting up the fair girl's countenance. Forgetting, for the moment, the jeopardy in which the act placed the lives of both of them, Single-Eye lowered his sombrero below the limb, and for one instant waved it.

Trembling with apprehension, and anathematizing himself for his rashness, he again felt greatly relieved at finding the act had not been observed. Still, he was anxious, for he feared that the captive would, by the direction of her gaze, betray his presence.

It was evident, however, that the girl was as discerning and intelligent as she was beautiful; for, her face was no longer bent forward, and the scout saw that she allowed the bullet to roll off her skirt, and into the leaves.

He could now only wait in patience, until his pard, Old Rocky, could join him. Until then, he had done all that he could.

It could not be other than a failure, and would, moreover, prevent any further proceedings, did he make an attempt at a rescue; for, the Indians he well knew, would awaken at the slightest noise, and not only this, but it was very certain that the position of the maiden was visible to the sentinels.

Plainly, there was not one chance in a thousand that he could escape with her. He would, however, keep near her, and await any possible opportunity.

Having come to this decision, Single-Eye carefully returned to his post in the tree; where, having gained a safe distance from the lower limbs, he was about to make his way into another tree, when his movements were suddenly arrested, by a sight that caused him to clutch a bough in one hand, and his bowie in the other.

Outlined against the blue sky, was the be-feathered head of an Indian brave, and in motion!

Slowly and noiselessly it descended toward the old scout.

It was clearly now, or never. Single-Eye resolved, in his desperation, that he would make an attempt to save the beautiful girl by a mad dash downward; cutting her bonds, and then rushing out into the friendly thickets toward his horse. There was a chance for escape, could he but reach Skip-lively.

Having thus decided, and while he was in the act of lowering himself, a low, snake-like rattle reached his ears, and a sudden change came over him.

He answered the sound by a peculiar hiss; and, a moment after, a symmetrically formed Indian, with bearded leggings and fillet, three eagle-feathers flaunting from the latter, reached the scout's side, and extended his hand in silence.

Single-Eye grasped it, and placed it upon his heart.

"Dang my ole gran' marm's bestest black cat's kittens!" he whispered. "Turtle, I'm a good mind ter yell blue murder, an' spile ther biz in hand! Yer ther lastest human I'd 'a' thunk o' seein'; an' ther one I hankered most ter gaze et. Ef we-uns doesn't make caliker flicker outen ther Cormanch' camp, I'm a puser-animous pirut o' ther plains. That's a leetle gal in ther camp below, an' she's gut ter be snatched outen ther grip o' ther painted hell-yuns."

"Good, heap good! Turtle, he save pale-face squaw."

"Ya-as, that's hunk; but ther time hain't roved yet. Foller me, Tonk, an' we'll jine Skip. I c'u'd chaw my own nose off wi' pure glad et ther sight o' yer purty pictur', dang'd ef I c'u'dn't. But slow an' easy air ther p'ogramme, an' glide's ther word!"

Seated smoking and planning for the rescue, in the little "open" down the river from the Comanche camp, with Skip-lively, Single-Eye, and his red pard, Turtle, the Tonkaway, might have been seen half an hour later.

The Indian explained his presence as having been brought about by observing the horses of the Comanches on the opposite side of the river, and he having crept through the timber to reconnoiter, discovered also the captive white squaw, and had resolved to save her, when he was astonished at finding his old pard, Single-Eye, in the same tree, and evidently bent on the same mission.

In a few words, Single-Eye related to his Indian pard all that had transpired since, with Old Rocky, he had galloped into the timber of Elm Fork, for shelter when the "norther" swept down over the plains.

The Tonkaway listened intently, and was especially interested on being shown the scalp of the Comanche spy.

Without a word, he arose to his feet as the scout closed his narrative, and strode toward a huge tree near the eastern verge of the bottom timber. Springing into it, he began ascending as nimbly as a squirrel, and was soon lost from the view of Single-Eye, who addressed himself for consolation to his horse.

"Dang my cats, Skip! Ther Tonk air et his ole tricks ag'in, soon es he strikes our locate. Hyer I've bin givin' him all ther p'int's in ther p'ogramme, an' without even a grunt, he skutes up a tree like a painter, when, that's a pack o' black wolves a-howlin' et his heels.

"Howsomever, Skip, we-uns knows ther Tonk air squar' an' white, an' es deep es any red what ever wored feathers. He's hed somethin' struck him since I've bin slingin' gab thet hain't gut through our brain-boxes.

"He'll come down chuck full o' biz, I reckon; an' I hopes he'll see some show ter git ther leetle gal outen ther Cormanch' camp; though hit 'pears like a bilious sorter job 'bout now. Ef we-uns doesn't do some befty crawlin', slashin', an' shootin', I'm fear'd she'll git tortur'd by ther cussed olesquaws what's barbecuin' buffler-meet an' scrapin' hides et ther No'th Fork. Ther widder o' thet greasy scarifyer thet I tuck in outen ther wet et Elm Fork, 'll be r'arin', t'arin', an' chuck-full o' hyderphobic indig', when she comes ter find out her buck hes dusted on ther 'long, dark trail,' leavin' her ter scoop in her own grub.

"I wisht Ole Rock 'u'd show up. I hope ter Cristy, he's gut thet pilgrim loose from ther buffler-bull, without hevin' any bones broke. Ef he war hyer, an' thet pilgrim 'long o' him, ther two mought help me an' yeou, an' ther Tonk, an' we c'u'd gi'n ther red cusses a leetle more'n they c'u'd swaller without chokin'.

"Dang'd ef I doesn't git stiff, every time I squats ter grass!" he muttered, rising and stretching himself. "Hit 'u'd relieve my ole heart a heap, ef thet leetle gal war right side up wi' care, an' free an' airy as a Concho antelope. But, hyer comes ther Tonk, down ther tree, on ther whiz. He's struck some streak thet I can't git a peep et, er I'm badly bamboozled."

As the scout spoke, the Tonkaway shot down from the foliage to the earth; and, with the peculiar stride of his people, approached Single-Eye, saying, as he reached his side:

"Let my white brother jump in saddle. Turtle run fast to Mustang in wood. War-path open. So many Comanches on plain"—holding up six fingers—"Got so many white braves"—lowering all the fingers but two—"White braves tied fast with lariat. Single-Eye and Turtle save captives. Turtle want scalps on belt. No sound war-cry. Comanche must not give death-yell. Turtle has spoken."

With these words, the Tonkaway darted toward the river. Single-Eye decided, on the instant, that a party of braves, sent out in search of the spy that had been slain by himself, must have discovered and captured Old Rocky, and the man whom the latter had rescued from the back of the buffalo.

This must be the case, he reasoned; for there were no other white men in the vicinity. The concern and anxiety of Single-Eye was now great; for he well knew that it would be almost impossible to liberate his old pard and the stranger, without creating an alarm in the camp, and thus destroying the last chance of saving the life of the captive girl.

The outlook was indeed gloomy, but the scout had not much time in which to meditate upon it; for Turtle soon appeared mounted upon a fiery mustang, and Single-Eye was soon at his side.

"Look," said the Tonkaway. "The Comanches come. The white braves come, and their backs are tortured by the quirts of the Comanches. Let my white brother open his eyes."

"Dang'd ef yer ain't kerrect, Tonk! Hit must be Ole Rock, an' ther pilgrim he reskied. But what does ther cusses mean? They ain't p'inted toward ther camp."

"Don't like ride in camp when chief and braves all sleep. Wait till sun come. Then drive in white captives. Then Comanche yell heap."

"That's 'bout ther p'ogramme, I reckon, Tonk. Ther brave, what's et ther head o' thet leetle outfit, wants another eagle-feather stuck in his kerbase."

"He hes done a big thing in his way o' thinkin', an' he wants ter make ther most o' hit."

"Dang my ole heart! I'd like ter spile his circus. Does yer opine, Tonk, thet we kin take thet leetle party outen ther wet, without raisin' a rumpus thet'll be heard up-crick, et ther camp?"

"Mebbe so," was Turtle's laconic answer.

"Hit's a ormichty pecul'ar fix we air in, on 'count o' ther piece o' caliker; but ef we c'u'd git Ole Rock an' ther pilgrim 'way from ther hellyuns, we'd stan' a show ter make a brash run inter ther camp, an' scoop up ther angel what we see'd."

"I sw'ar ef I ain't a-gittin' p'ison hot mad, ter see ther greasy painted skunks a-whackin' Ole Rock; drivin' two white men wi' quirts, jist es though they was niggers. I want ter stompede ther bull big outfit up-crick, an' skin every head!"

"What in thunderation air ter be did, Tonk? Hit air a sight ter make any human hanker arter Comanch' bleed, an' his fingers itch ter clutch ha'r!"

It was upon Single-Eye's report that Turtle had decided in his own mind that the captives he had seen approaching at some distance were Old Rocky and the stranger; consequently, the friendly Indian had dashed at once for his horse, as we have seen, resolved that he would rescue Old Rocky at any and all hazards.

But, as time passed, and Turtle had considered the subject in all its bearings, the attempt seemed more difficult of accomplishment. There could be but little doubt that the outermost sentinels of the camp would hear the danger or death-yells of the little war-party should the latter be attacked. They were now prevented by a little bend in the Clear Fork to the eastward, from discovering the return of their six comrades; the latter having turned to the northward, the reason for which the Tonkaway had explained.

As Single-Eye put the last question to his red pard, who sat his horse, silent and immovable as a statue of bronze, Turtle suddenly gave utterance to a guttural grunt of satisfaction, and as he turned his mustang down the stream, he at length spoke:

"Come. My white brother shall stain his knife in Comanche blood. Come."

The old scout now felt confident that the Tonkaway had thought of some feasible plan to free the captives, and he quickly followed him.

Halting near the edge of the timber, Turtle again spoke:

"My white brother see chief—see two braves ride in front. Then come white captives. Then two more braves. One brave ride behind with dead spy."

"Ya-as, I sees that."

"Good! When ride by bush here, Single-Eye, he stick knife in throat of last Comanche. Turtle, he ride fast from bush at same time. Turtle cut loose captives, then kill two braves. Then Single-Eye and Turtle ride quick to chief and other two braves. Quick fight. Much heap knife stick in throat. Much heap blood. No death-yell."

"Dang my cats! Thet air a purty fa'r p'ogramme. Tonk, hit air easy ter talk 'bout, but I opine our knife-arms hes gut ter fly like a Gov'ment mule's huffs when hit's full o' prussic acid indig'."

"Hit's scrougin' a hefty riffle o' fun inter some awful flighty hash'd-up periuda. Howsomever, hit hes gut ter be did; fer Ole Rock must be reskied, er we'll lose ha'r a tryin'. Skip"—turning to his horse—"do your bestest now, ter skin us through this hyer lively leetle circus. Ole Rock air tuck by ther cussed red heathuns!"

The last piece of information was whispered in the ear of Skip-lively, with an emphasis on "Ole Rock" and "red heathuns;" and the horse began to manifest much interest, rolling his lone optic, pricking his ears, front and back, as if listening for sounds at all points of the compass, while he braced his legs, seemingly gathering strength for action. It did seem as if the manner, words and gestures of his master had been fully comprehended.

Having thus decided upon the manner of attack, the two men drew their long, glittering, and murderous knives; clutching the handles with desperate grip, as they made ready for the terrible and unequal conflict—made ready to plunge headlong from the dense undergrowth, very possibly to their deaths, to save the captives whom they suppose to be their mutual pard, Old Rocky, and the stranger whom the latter had rescued from his fearful Mazeppa ride upon the maddened bison.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"THE GAME NOT WORTH THE CANDLE."

ALL unconscious of danger, the little war-party advanced along the margin of the timber, with their captives and the dead spy, evidently with the intention of encamping there until the morning and then making a grand *entre* into the main camp.

Single-Eye and the Tonkaway were screened by the undergrowth from view, and it also prevented them from discovering that Old Rocky was not among the captives. But, even had they done so, their plans would not have been changed in consequence, from the fact that the prisoners were white men, and doomed, they well knew, to a fearful death by slow torture.

The dull tramp of hoofs soon spoke the nearness of the Comanches. Gazing forward over the necks of their horses, their knives grasped and every muscle strained, the two men watched them from their covert.

The *cortege* marched in the manner that the Tonkaway had described them. All were gazing ahead as if having suspicions that they might be perceived by their comrade braves of the big camp and thus be defrauded of their grand entrance on the morrow. This would be fearfully disappointing.

Their attitude was most fortunate for our friends, in the daring and desperate attempt they had resolved upon making.

Slowly out from the undergrowth they rode, as the last brave rode past, and then shot forward like arrows from bows, one on each side of the warrior in charge of the corpse-laden mustang.

Before he realized his danger, the Tonkaway was upon him and soon the head of the doomed brave had been nearly severed from his body, and without a gasp he fell from his affrighted horse to the earth, the steed, with its ghastly-burdened companion, dashing back in frantic bounds over the trail.

Before the two who were in advance and lashing the captives became aware of the presence of enemies, each was grasped by the hair, falling dead in like manner, without even a groan, while their steeds were forced from the trail in order that they might not impede the way in the deadly combat to come.

The blood-dripping knives quickly severed the cords of the captives, the old scout and his Indian pard only leaning from their saddles for an instant,

and then dashing headlong forward, not noticing the men they had liberated.

The sub-chief and the two remaining warriors, alarmed by the confusion in their rear, whirled their mustangs and beheld, with amazement and fury, a terrible tableau. The dead braves on the sward, the captives at liberty, and the authors of all this—Single-Eye and a detested Tonkaway—with gory blades and furious hatred in their faces, bounding forward upon them!

The astonishment of the three Comanches at this strange and unexpected sight was so great that they were for the moment motionless.

Before they could fully recover their presence of mind, Single-Eye and Turtle were upon them.

No time was there now for even a yell; no time for aught but desperate defense.

Flight was out of the question, and the thought of scores of their comrades being near at hand seemed to have been entirely lost sight of.

There were still three against two, however, and the red warriors recovered themselves as the knives of their enemies clashed against their own. Through the bright moonlight could now be seen a mingled mass of maddened steeds and paint-daubed faces, from which glared snake-like eyes, with wildly flying hair and flaunting feathers, and, in the midst of all, the one-eyed scout and his one-eyed horse—a striking central figure.

The terrible struggle was soon over. The six Comanches, dead, or in the spasms of death, lay on the sward; no death-yell or alarming sound of any description having been made by them.

This most desperate conflict had ended so quickly and so successfully that the two actors in the tragic drama were themselves astonished.

They now stood, bespattered with blood, and panting with the exertion and continuous, almost superhuman action, looking at each other in actual bewilderment. This was speedily blended with indignation; for a backward glance over the scene of the fight showed only the outstretched corpses, now hideous in the silvery moonlight.

Nowhere in sight were the liberated captives; neither was there a horse visible except those held in check by themselves, and the steed of the sub-chief, with those of the last two braves killed.

No aid had been expected, by either the old scout or the Tonkaway, from the captives, after the latter had been set at liberty; indeed, they both knew that the two men had been driven on foot until they could barely stagger along, and were unable, when released, to afford it. But they were surprised and indignant when they realized that those for whom they had risked their lives against such fearful odds had fled, on the instant, without even a word of thanks.

For all this, only a "waugh" of astonishment from Turtle, and grunt that meant the same, from Single-Eye, were the only attention paid it.

At once they led the horses of the Comanches and their own into the undergrowth, and after securing them there returned and scalped the slain, hurling the bodies into the bushes, far from view. This done, they returned to the animals, and without mounting led them down-stream for about a quarter of a mile, until another "open" was reached.

Then the old scout broke out, in anger and bewilderment:

"Dang my half-sister's black cat's kittenst! What kinder condemned biz air this hyer anyways?"

"What did them ornary gerloots skip ter? I hed my peeper freeze on ter red meat ther hull time, so I hed no show ter take a peep et ther two white men we slashed loose. Howsomever, I'm incernated ter opine they ain't so danged white es we tuck 'em ter be. I knows that neither war Ole Rock, dead sure an' sartain."

"Hit's some satisfac', though, ter know we've wiped out half a dozen o' ther bellyuns; but, dang my cats! I doesn't understan' how ther white cusses gut away so speedy, when they must ha' bin 'bout ready ter wilt down ter grass when we lunged in ter save the'r ha'r."

"What d'ye make o' this hyer biz, Tonk?"

"Turtle no talk much—think heap," was the reply. "Old Rocky not here. White men not braves. Heap bad white men. They hide in bushes, but Comanche find when sun come."

"Dog my cats ef I keer ef they does git cotched ag'in, I swar they ain't no 'count. But I'd gi'n one o' my years ter know whar Ole Rock air 'bout now."

Barely had the old scout said this when Turtle grasped his arm and dragged him into the thicket near them.

"What in thunderation's ther row now, Tonk?" he whispered, impatiently. "Don't yank me 'roun' fer nothin'!"

A snake-like hiss was the only answer of the Tonkaway. This was followed by a peculiar bird-like whistle.

Grasping the arm of Turtle, Single-Eye said in a hoarse whisper:

"Answer ther music, Tonk. Hit air ther sweetest I ever heered. Dang my bilious heart, ef Ole Rock ain't on deck! Spoke o' angels an' yer'll hear 'em sing clost after."

"Hold me, Tonk, er I'll kick an' rear up, an' roll inter ther Cl'ar Fork, jist b'illin' over w'l' pure he ole glad."

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE COMANCHE CAMP.

As Single-Eye ceased speaking the Tonkaway gave utterance to an exaggerated imitation of the note of a locust, and soon the branches of the thicket parted and the face of Old Rocky appeared, gazing into the "open."

Convinced at a glance that all was well, the old man stepped clear of the bushes, followed by Will Washburne, and was at once met by Single-Eye.

"Dang my heart, Ole Rock!" he exclaimed, wringing the hand of his pard. "I never hankered arter a gaze et yer purty pictur' any wusser'n 'bout now!"

"Jumpin' Jerushel!" returned Old Rocky, "I'm ornighly glad ter strike yer, ole pard, an' ter find ther Tonk has j'ined yer, ready fer biz. Dog-goned ef this ain't some like ole times, sorter nat'ral! Howsomever, hyer are ther man we see'd on ther buffler-bull. I'll intrudeck him es Will Washburne; es part a pilgrim, when he's hisself, es ever come nigh bein' salivated by ther red heathens."

"Stranger," said Single-Eye, "I'm a-shakin' yer

paw out o' pure glad. I knowed yer war a hefty fighter et ther hearse, er ther heathun wouldn't 'a' gi'n yer sich a send-off. This air Turtle, ther Tonk-away, a pard o' ourn."

"He's ther whitest an' squarest red on ther 'Merican section o' this hyer big ball o' dirt."

"I'm extremely rejoiced to meet you, gentlemen," said Will, "and I begin to feel more hopeful of success."

"I have not entirely recovered from my terrible ride, but I feel nerved to battle most desperately for the rescue of my promised wife."

"Jist so," responded Single-Eye. "We'll resky yer leetle gal, I'm reckonin', afore sun-up. We've hed a rifle o' high ole fun, pard Rock, jist now."

"Ish'ud's'pose yer hed," said Old Rocky, pointing to the scalp at the belts of Single-Eye and Turtle; "but yer doesn't mean ter asservate thet yer skinned six heads without raisin' a big an' gin'ral rumpust."

"I'm opinin', pard Will, thet ther leetle party o' reds what scooped in ther two gerloots on Elm Fork, hes hed it socked to 'em hyer. Ef so, an' ther white cusses hes bin sot loose, things air li'ble ter be mixed ag'in."

"Is this so?" asked Will, quickly. "Had they two white captives, and did you free them?"

"I'll tell yer ther hull biz in no time," said Single-Eye. "Fact air, ther Tonk disklivered ther party o' reds on ther plain leadin' tew white men, an' we 'uns tuck 'em ter be you-'uns what hed bin tuk."

"Tonk an' I war in a fix, knowin' ther big camp war a leetle ways up-crick, an' thet ef we 'lowed a yell ter break loose we'd be broke up, an' ther leetle gal, too. Howsomever, we war boun' ter resky yer both, an' we played a lively game w'l' our stickers."

"Then, arter we'd tuck ther reds all in outen ther wet, we foun' ther gerloots what we'd run sich risk for, hed levanted, an' we 'uns hev'n't seen 'em since!"

"Ther two white men yer cut loose are condemned klotes," said Old Rocky, "an' Will hyer kin tell yer all 'bout 'em when thar's time. I'm ther pilgrim thet 'll gi'n 'em a send-off ef thar's a show ter do hit."

"They follered Will's leetle gal, what air blood-relation o' Cap Florence et Fort Phantom Hill, an' they'd like ter scoop her in an' take her back ter ther States fer a cussed purpos'."

"Thet's 'nough said atween us now, Single-Eye, but we'll keep our peepers peeled fer 'em. What we're interested in 'bout now air ther leetle gal, what must be nigh dead w'l' skeer an' tortur'. Hev yer see'd her, Tonk? Or yeou, ole pard?"

Single-Eye then detailed his adventures in the camp of the Comanches, at the close of which Will exclaimed:

"By Heavens, gentlemen. I cannot remain inactive! Flora must be torn from these inhuman monsters at once, or I shall go mad. For God's sake, let us contrive some plan toward her release!"

"Easy, easy, young pard," advised Single-Eye; "hit air a ticklish job, an' hev gut ter be did on ther sly. Everythin' hev worked slam-up an' hunk, so far, an' I knows ther hull lay o' ther camp. We needn't ter be afear'd o' ther ornary gerloots what we 'uns cut loose doin' any damidge. They're purty well wilted w'l' ther long run an' ther hefty lashin' they gut. Ther leetle gal air safe, es fur es they air consarned."

"Say, Ole Rock, what yer gut in yer brain-box?"

"I'm tryin' ter sift ther hull biz," was the reply.

"Thar hes gut ter be somethin' did toward gittin' Miss Flory outen ther camp afore sun-up. Will, hyer, war nigh outen throwin' up his checks when I struck ther buffler-bull; but he's gut 'roun' purty peart since then—surprisin' peart, all things considered. I reckon he kin put in licks ter count, an' 'mong us we kin make things howl."

"Hold on!" exclaimed Single-Eye. "Ef I ain't struck an idee thet'll pan out O. K. for all consarned, I'm ther dang'dest perrarer peregrinat' per-varicator thet ever p'inted peeper at a Piute! Ther cussed, greasy Comanches tuck ther nags all 'cross crick, las' night, an' thar camp air on this side o' ther drink."

"Does yer tumble ter my leetle game? Hit's a reg'lar plain open an' shet, on ther sarlliss scheme. 'Whooper-e-e-e! I wish't I c'ud laugh an' yell 'bout five minutes. We've gut ther bellyuns, sure es shootin'. Ef we hean't, I'll gree ter chaw scorpions fer grub, ther next six moons!"

The words and manner of the old scout greatly impressed Will Washburne, and filled him with joy and hope. The Tonkaway, also, seemed to be weighing them; and as Single-Eye closed his remarks, Turtle said:

"Good! My white brother great scout."

"I sees yer leetle game, pard," put in Old Rocky. "Ye're on yer ole lay-out. Stompede ther stock, an' then skate through ther camp on ther whiz, when ther most o' ther reds air jist a-whoopin' arter thar nags."

"Thet's ther game, right ter ther bull's-eye; an' we 'uns kin play hit," said Single-Eye. "Thar ain't no time ter lose slingin' tongue, neither. Whar's yer critters?"

Will and Old Rocky answered, by immediately passing from the "open" into the thicket, north; soon returning, leading their horses.

"Thet's all bunk," said Single-Eye. "We'll leave ther nags we tuck from ther reds, all 'ceptin' one fer Miss Flory, whar hit'll be safe; an' then levant 'cross crick, lungin' right inter speedy biz."

Without further talk this plan was carried out.

When this was done, all, in single file, advanced to the stream, wading across it, and keeping in the darkest shades. A short halt on the west bank, for consultation, ended in each taking a different path toward the western edge of the bottom timber.

The plan was, that each, upon a signal from Turtle, should spring upon one of the horse-guards, and knife him, at once, preventing any howl or death-yell; and that then the horses were to be cut loose, as fast as possible, and stampeded away from their position, near the line of timber, over the west plain.

All was silent, for some time, in and around the Clear Fork bottom; then the ominous hoot of an owl caused all to make ready for the desperate encounter.

The signal again sounded. It was not an unusual sound, and did not startle those so near to death, now seated on the sward, and but a pistol-shot in distance from each other.

But a brief interval elapsed, and then four forms, each with a glittering knife upraised, sprang into the moonlight from the bushes, and bounded upon their victims. Grasping them by the long hair, they jerked their heads backward, and plunged the murderous blades into the upturned throats.

Up into the silvery moonlight, shot spurts and sprays of blood, followed by gurgling and gasping sounds, as the writhing forms struggled in the spasms of death. The reeking scalps were then torn from their heads, and two of the men rushed, knife in hand, among the mustangs, cutting the animals loose on the run. Old Rocky and Single-Eye quickly dragged the corpses of the slain together, and lashing them one by one to the back of a horse, directed Will and the Tonkaway to slash them free also.

The four prancing, half-wild mustangs scented the blood, and bounded madly forward with snorts of frenzy toward the massed herd in their front.

This created a panic, and they all dashed over the plain in a thundering stampede.

"Git, boyees! Git fer t'other side ther drink up crick! Git fer our hoss-meat, and then, hurra fer Miss Flory. Biz air opened brisk, an' yells'll soon bu'st out. Skute speedy, fer thar's a open fer a merry rifle o' fun, er a boss chance ter be tortur'd, whichever hit air recorded fer us!"

Single-Eye rattled these words off with almost the rapidity of lightning, and the next moment he disappeared from view in the deep shades of the undergrowth, followed by Old Rocky, Will Washburne, and Turtle the Tonkaway on the run down-stream.

In a moment more, danger-yells, rallying-whoops, and howls of savage rage rung on the night air. The camp of the red foe had been aroused.

CHAPTER XXV.

FROM THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE.

A FULL confidence in being secure from attack had caused the Comanche chief, Rolling Thunder, to station less sentinels than usual, and also to allow his warriors to give themselves a feast—something that is permitted only at the end of a war-trail.

The only possible apprehension of danger was from the east, and from this point their spies would warn them. They had, therefore, merely taken the precaution to lariat their animals on the west side of the stream, making it impossible for any force of enemies, approaching from the east plain, to locate their camp by any visible signs.

Thus it was that, when the thunder of the stampede reached the ears of the guards about the camp, and the slumberers were awakened by the danger-yells, the first thought was of a stampede of buffalo. But hearing no yells of alarm from the sentinels that had been placed over the horses, the suspicions of the warriors were aroused. This was confirmed by a moment's listening. They then realized that something was wrong in that direction—something that implied the presence of enemies, impossible though it seemed.

One thing was plain: they were left on foot.

In the confusion of the moment, many braves rushed toward the stream, which they would not have done except under the circumstances mentioned, each being eager to secure his horse.

Rolling Thunder was furious at the disaster, but confident that no enemies were near, still he ordered half a dozen of the warriors to remain, and guard the camp, while he himself dashed after the mob of braves.

At the time when poor Flora Florence was discovered by Single-Eye, she had given up all hope of life.

No longer did there seem a possibility of the soldiers from Fort Phantom Hill overtaking the war-party, and rescuing her; and she felt sure, that, should they come up with the savages, it would be the signal for her instant death. And life was sweet to the poor girl, now that she had reason to believe that her mother lived.

Nothing, however, was now left, upon which she could build the slightest hope; and a review of her life, with all the wrongs that had been hers from the first, gave to her the belief that she had, from birth, been doomed to misery, and that her awful fate could in no way be averted.

It was no wonder that the captive maiden had become completely disheartened. The wonder was that she still lived. Her one prayer now was, that it would all end soon.

In this state of mind Flora saw something drop through the patch of moonlight, and felt a small, but heavy object strike her dress. A small, round substance rolled into the moonlight, and great was her surprise when she perceived that it was a bullet.

A ray of hope darted, like a flash of light, into the poor girl's mind. She knew that the bullet could not have been in the tree; that it must have been let fall by a human being; and, not only this, but it must have been dropped intentionally, to attract her notice, and consequently by some one who was her friend.

Raising her eyes, and gazing upward, she at first saw nothing; but dimly, however, the wrinkled face of a white man, with but one eye, met her view. There was no beauty in the face, nevertheless it was to Flora the face of an angel. It promised release from death, and worse than death; and her features showed her relief and thankfulness, as, with a wave of a sombrero, the face disappeared in the dense foliage, and was gone.

At first, Flora feared that it might be a vision of her disordered imagination, all evidences of the vision—the bullet having been suffered to roll away into the grass—being gone. She listened intently, and, to her joy, heard the movements of some one in the huge tree above her.

All doubt now vanished. Flora was confident that help was near. But from what source had it come?

Could it be possible that Will—her Will—had been saved from his awful position on the buffalo, and had followed the trail; this one-eyed man having been his rescuer?

But, no! If such had been the case, surely Will himself would have showed his face; or, it might be that his guide had prevented this, fearing that, in his strong emotion, he might betray his presence to

the Indians, and thus destroy all prospects of a rescue.

From this last, plausible thought, Flora derived some consolation; and, when she considered the matter, she decided that, unless Will Washburne had been liberated, this stranger would not have followed the trail, for he could not have known, except from Will, that a white maiden was in the hands of the Comanches.

Hope came thus to the suffering girl, just in time to save her from becoming an insane wreck.

She now reclined against the tree, and gazed at the shades on all sides, striving to pierce the darkness, and yet dreading, even while she hoped, to see the form and face of her lover; for she feared that he would, in his anxiety and fury, jeopardize his own life in a useless attempt to rescue her.

Thus the night passed on, until the yells of the sentinels caused the heart of the poor captive to spring to her throat in apprehension; for the first thought with her now, was, that her rescuers would themselves be taken. Then her wonder was increased, by the rush of the braves from the camp toward the river.

Seeing then, when the first excitement was over, that there were but a few warriors remaining in the camp, Flora suddenly thought, that now was the opportunity for her friends, if they were indeed near at hand.

At this time, the Indians who remained, were all standing beyond her, and nearer the river, gazing with wonder and concern toward the stream, and listening intently to the bedlam of sounds on the west plain. This fact caused Flora to wish most sincerely that she could then discover the friendly face she had caught a glimpse of in the tree.

Just then, she felt her bonds being cut; but, before she could turn her eyes, a blanket was thrown over her head, and she was clasped in the arms of a man, who, as she knew, stole cautiously to the south, amid the trees, for some distance, being then joined by another.

A few muttered sentences passed between them, which Flora could not catch, though she knew the words were English. Then both men ran onward, at a rapid gait; and, at the very moment when those, whom she supposed to be her friends, started on the run, the report of fire-arms sounded through the arches of the timber, accompanied by Comanche war-whoops, and cries of agony and death.

Though Flora's face had been shielded by the blanket, and her rescuers had not spoken to her—things suspicious in themselves—Flora had not dreamed that other enemies than the Indians were in the vicinity. Now, however, a whirlpool of strange thoughts passed through her mind. She knew full well that Will Washburne was not one of her rescuers, or he would have made himself known to her immediately upon reaching a safe distance.

From the fact that there had been no yells from the Comanches at the time of her release, she reasoned that the red-men were not aware of her escape; why, then, was this silence, and why had her face been thus shrouded, ere she was hurried away. All this had a suspicious look.

The mystery, however, was soon to be explained. Poor Flora was again doomed to be hurled back into the depths of dread, and despair; and this from a source, from which she had believed herself to be free entirely and forever!

Her rescuers had now halted. The man who bore her in his arms had laid her upon the sward; but, although the bonds that had fastened her to the tree had been severed, her wrists were still bound, consequently she lay helpless.

In a moment more the blanket was jerked from her head, and she saw that she was in a small opening, into which the moon shone brightly.

Flora also perceived that two men stood before her, and as her eyes became accustomed to the light, the faces of the men were revealed to her—faces that were villainous and crime-stamped, and now filled with most unholy exultation.

Their clothing was nearly all torn from their bodies, which were blood-stained, and showed the marks of severe scourging, evidently done with a rawhide.

At a glance Flora Florence saw this, and her eyes now darted from a face that was strange to her, to the other, which seemed strangely familiar.

As she glanced into this face, a Satanic laugh broke from the owner, and Flora shrieked with horror. Her brain seemed filled with crackling flames, and knives seemed to be piercing her very heart.

As she fell fainting to the ground, the fiendish laugh still sounded in her ears—the laugh of her self-constituted guardian, of the man who had stolen her, when an infant, from her mother, who had driven that mother to insanity, who had murdered her father—the hellish laugh of Mart Maxwell, the miscreant of the Missouri!

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE THICKEST OF THE FIGHT.

THE exact location of the captive maiden in the camp being known to Single-Eye and Turtle, our four friends had no doubts but that, through a desperate dash, shooting down all who stood in their way, they could rescue the girl, and escape with her. They made no halt, therefore, but spurred on as fast as the nature of the ground would admit.

Reaching the margin of the north line of thickets, bordering the camp, Single-Eye and the Tonkaway drew up until their companions joined them; then, neck and neck, on they went, in a headlong charge into the midst of the warriors who had remained in the camp, Single-Eye making a point to reach the tree to which Flora was bound.

On went the horses of our friends in an overwhelming charge, their rifles and revolvers vomiting fire and lead, causing the Comanches over the stream to decide that a large force of troops had attacked their camp. Being without their horses, they were helpless, and did not dare think of returning.

Will Washburne, insanely eager and anxious, dashed after Single-Eye, battling madly with all that opposed him; but was paralyzed of a sudden by the words of the latter, as he sprung from his horse, yelling:

"Ther leetle gal air gone! Ther dang'd white kites hev run in ahead o' us! Git, boyees, git up crick, an' beat ther bush! Scatter, an' we'll kerral

ther leetle gal, fer they must ha' tuck her since ther reds struck 'cross ther drink."

Will Washburne at last comprehended the situation. So far he felt relieved. Flora was free from the fiendish Indians, and, had as Mart Maxwell was, Will was confident he would do her no bodily harm.

Besides this, Maxwell could not escape with her, for he had no horses, and knew nothing of the country.

At once the quartette of pardset out, on different paths, each watching for the miscreants, whose lives were now forfeited beyond all hope.

All that Rolling Thunder and his braves could now see and hear was a mass of dead and dying warriors, and the monotonous chant of death-songs, as they returned toward their camp; but, fearing an ambush, not daring to enter it.

Here and there, up-stream, the four men dashed, at last realizing that this was useless, as the movements of their horses would warn the pursued of their approach. A low signal from Single-Eye now drew them together, and a consultation was held, which ended in their deciding to search the bottom timber on foot; all judging, with good reason, that the two fiendish persecutors of Flora Florence had been so roughly used by the Indians, as to prevent them from proceeding far.

The animals were therefore led by Old Rocky to the extreme eastern edge of the timber, and they all set out on foot; Will, although unused to tramping, or traversing the wilds, insisting upon being one of the exploring party. No time was lost. Old Rocky could not only guard the animals, but could keep a lookout over the plain to the east, from which direction any troops that might have been sent out from the fort would be likely to approach.

With great caution, they proceeded; Turtle following a course parallel with that of Will, and some distance nearer the stream, while Single-Eye stole along nearer the bank. Thus, up the Clear Fork, they stealthily made their way.

Not far had they proceeded, when sounds of conflict ahead, from which sounded deep curses in English, caused our three friends to rush like madmen toward the scene of strife.

A strange scene it was.

Entering a small opening, the trio saw, on the opposite side, a dozen Comanche braves, amid whom were struggling desperately the two ruffians of whom they were in search.

As our friends sprung forward into the "open," the sight that most maddened and agonized them, and Will more especially, was poor Flora, now being borne away in the arms of a burly brave; her head, with its wealth of golden hair, hanging over his arm, her arms limp, and her whole appearance indicating that the poor girl was senseless.

With knife in hand, the young man sprung forward, yelling in his intense fury and anguish.

Gathering his strength for desperate conflict as he went, Will dashed on; Single-Eye and Turtle leaving him the satisfaction of rescuing the maiden. They sprung toward the warriors who were striving to drag the white ruffians, Mart and Rand, into the undergrowth, but little caring whether they killed the two outlaws, or not.

In among the horde they bounded, shooting their revolvers right and left; then, after emptying the chambers of the weapons, they drew their knives, and fought with desperation, making their way to the two men, whom they knocked senseless with the butts of their revolvers; but not until the ruffians had received several stabs, in an endeavor to escape from their red captors, who now beat 'a hasty retreat—that is, all who were in a condition to do so.

Half of the Comanches lay dead upon the sward.

But a little less revolting and horrible in appearance than the hideous braves, were Mart Maxwell and Rand Rogers; their clothing in rags; their faces besmeared with blood, and their bare backs lacerated and swollen from the lashing received on their forced run from Elm Fork to Clear Fork.

The surviving Comanches sought cover, with many a howl of dread and terror; some badly wounded, some chanting their dreary death-songs, and all believing that the camp they had chosen was "Bad Medicine." The demoralization among the braves was general; the mysterious events of the night having awakened their superstitious fears.

Panting with exertion and excitement, and filled with a thirst for revenge upon their foes, that had made them invincible in their dashing attack upon the Indians—thus stood Turtle and Single-Eye, masters of the field, and having in their power the two ruffians, the lives of whom they had, but a little while ago, saved from the red-men.

We must now, however, follow Will Washburne, after he had been left to show his skill and powers, by his two friends. The latter well knew that one man would have a better chance to rescue the maiden alone, and that any attempts of theirs to assist, might only bring about her death.

About the same time, therefore, that Single-Eye and the Tonkaway sprung among the massed braves, a pistol-shot away, Will came within ten feet of the Comanche who held his darling.

At the distance mentioned, the red captor cast his eyes in the rear, warned by the onslaught of foes upon his comrade braves.

The looks and manner of the man, now so close upon him, knife in hand, convinced the Indian of his danger; so he whirled about, cast his lovely burden roughly upon the ground, causing Will to utter a yell of rage and anguish, and drawing his scalping-knife, he stood ready to meet the white foe who advanced upon him.

The muscular build of the young man showed the Comanche that he had no child's play before him.

He saw that his life depended upon the play that he could give his arm and steel, in the briefest possible space of time.

There was another thought that flashed into the mind of the Indian, and which somewhat curtailed his powers of fight. This was, that he recognized in his foe the self-same captive whom he had assisted his brother braves to bind upon the back of the buffalo only the previous morning, thus condemning him to a terrible and lingering death.

As, however, the savage thrust his knife at his opponent, he found it dextrously parried, and Will, with furious and overwhelming force, darted directly upon him, hurling him to the earth.

Both now clutched each other in a desperate grip, rolling over and over and each bringing his entire strength to bear in his efforts to kill the other. As each held the wrist of the other's knife-hand, the struggle was thus prolonged.

And a fearful contest it was!

At times the young man would be uppermost, and then the positions of the combatants would be reversed.

All the time the mind of Will was tortured by the consciousness that Flora lay senseless, perhaps stricken with death, near at hand. Then, there were the sounds of fierce conflict between his friends and the savage foe but a little distance away which came to his ears; and, as the Comanche's snake-like eyes met his, the youth realized that possibly—nay, probably—his two pards might be slain!

In that case the Indians would again have Flora in their power, and would also put an end to his own life.

Either this, or it might be that one or other of the inhuman white men who had cursed the life of Flora Florence from the first night, during the confusion an *m-lee*, escape and bear the poor girl off with them.

These probabilities drove Will to a more desperate state of fury and apprehension than ever. Nervous himself, therefore, for one herculean effort and instantaneous action, he succeeded in throwing the warrior over, and in this way gaining the advantage in position.

At the same time, by an electric-like twist of his wrist, he wrenched his right hand free, and raised it high over his head, pointed at the breast of his foe. The latter quickly attempted to parry the expected blow by bringing his left arm upward and then strove to writhe from beneath his adversary.

But the movements of the youth were quick as the lightning flash. He saw that the moment of all moments in his life had arrived.

The next move must be a strategic one. With a feigning motion as if to plunge his knife downward he caused the Comanche to strike up and outward, to ward it off. On the instant Will raised the knife again and it shot like a flash of light, crunching through bone and flesh, to the very hilt, in the breast of the Indian.

The heart of the red-man was literally clove in twain and the rich life-tide spurted up over his slayer and the grass and flowers on every side.

One yell, the horrible death-yell, came from the throat of the warrior, and then followed a convulsive struggle. The paint-daubed brave writhed for a few moments, like a crushed serpent; then, suddenly, all motion ceased.

Trembling like an aspen leaf, Will Washburne arose, a cry of thankfulness upon his lips, and staggered toward the still form of his rescued darling, staggered like a babe taking its first steps.

The strength of the young man had been exhausted.

Thus, he reached the side of poor Flora, who lay as one dead; her golden tresses mingling with the dew-sprinkled green blades of grass, and the tiny flowerets. Then Will gazed downward, his brave heart bursting with its conflicting emotions.

For a brief space he stood thus, swaying back and forth, his knife still in his hand; then, he fell forward upon the sward by the side of her whom he loved, all sense and motion gone from him!

Turtle and Single-Eye, turning away from the scene of their furious and unequal contest, on through the dead and dying braves, and senseless white ruffians, in search of their young pard, thus found him.

There he lay, stricken to the earth, like a forest pine by lightning; having, in the rescue of his darling Flora, received, as they supposed, in their grief and concern for him, his death wound!

CHAPTER XXVII.

AFTER SO MANY YEARS.

TURTLE, the Tonkaway, sunk to the earth, by the side of Flora first; and, having felt her wrist gingerly, and placed his hand on her breast, proceeded to make the same examination of Will.

Then, with a grunt of satisfaction he answered the questioning glance of Single-Eye.

"Too much heap ride on buffalo in hot sun for white brother. Too much heap trouble in head. White Rose, with hair like sunshine, think Comanche torture, think bad white man kill. She wilt like flower on hill, when grass on prairie burn. Water from Clear Fork make heads clear. Waugh!"

The Tonkaway then dexterously removed the scalp of the dead Indian before him, and placing it in his belt, set off to secure other like trophies.

Greatly relieved at the confident assertions of Turtle, in regard to Will and Flora, Single-Eye ran quickly to the river, and filling his sombrero with water, returned and applied it to the heads of both, who soon began to show signs of returning consciousness.

In a little time, the old scout had the satisfaction of assisting both to a sitting posture.

When the first bewilderment of the young man had passed, he caught the wondering girl in his arms, crying out in his joy and gratitude:

"Again, my poor Flora; again I hold you thus! Single-Eye, may Heaven ever bless you!"

"Oh, Will!" exclaimed the girl; "can it be really you? Once I thought that you had saved me from those dreadful Indians, but it was my horrid old guardian, who had me again in his power."

Then, turning to the scout, Flora said, with deep feeling:

"And here is one, to whom I owe much; for, when I was in despair, he appeared to me, and I felt from that moment that friends were near."

"This," said Will, "is the noted scout, Single-Eye; and to him, and his two friends, we owe our lives."

"I will pray for you as long as I live," said the maiden, extending her hand to the old scout. He grasped it eagerly, but replied somewhat impatiently:

"Thar! Thet'll do o' thet sort o' gab, fer both on yer. Me an' my pards don't 'spect no soft-sodder perliaver fer doin' our juty; an' 'sides, this hyer ain't no place ter hold a inquiry-meetin'."

"Turtle air a-harvestin' ha'r, but he'll soon git in ther hull crap; an' then we-we-uns must make ourselves skeerce, right peart-like, er mebbe so we'll git scooped in arter all."

"I'm ormighty full o' glad thet things hes panned out as they hes; but this hyer air a big ball o' dirt, what's allers floppin' over, an' ringin' changes, thet we may hev ter buck ag'in' fer life."

"Yer hes both hed some consider'ble hashed-up hellishness crowded onto yer, in a few deetin' periods, an' hit orter l'arn yer somethin'."

"Come; we'll p'int toward Old Rock, arter 'tendin' ter ther white scum o' civerlize what follered yer from Fort Belknap."

Both Will and Flora, now greatly strengthened by the revived hopes of the last few minutes, followed the old scout toward the Tonkaway. Upon arriving at the scene of the fight, Will called to Turtle, saying to Flora, as the Indian approached:

"Flora, this is Turtle, a friendly Tonkaway, who has battled nobly to save you—he and Old Rocky, another scout, whom we shall soon see."

Turtle stood, with folded arms, his eyes fastened upon Flora in adoration, as he said:

"Turtle heap glad see White Rose. Scalp must not hang on Comanche lodge-pole. Turtle friend. Single-Eye friend, Old Rocky friend. All fight till sing death-song for Will and White Rose."

"May the Great Spirit bless you, Turtle," said the young girl; "I hope we shall meet in the days to come, and not require you to risk life for us."

"Tie these white scum, hand and foot, and drag 'em inter ther bush, speedy!" cried out Single-Eye, quickly. "Ther red hellyuns' nags hes bin headed off, an' brung'd back by some o' ther bufler-hunters o' thar cussed tribe, an' they're hot mad ter git up an' git arter we-uns."

The eyes of the Tonkaway blazed with the war spirit of his people, as the yells of the Comanches were now audible. He assisted, however, in binding Mart and Rand, and then the two ruffians, still senseless from loss of blood, and the severe treatment they had undergone, were dragged into a dense thicket.

"Ef so a chance comes, we'll glide this-a-way, an' gi'n' ther cusses a lariat send-off," said Single-Eye; "es it star's now, skute air ther word. Come on! We'll strike Ole Rock, an' thar nags speedy, an' then hev a council, es 'gards further perceedings."

Our friends had gone but a little distance, when Old Rocky broke into view, exclaiming:

"Come on, pard, lively! Thar's a show fer a bigger rumpus than I opines yer hes hed down yunder. I'm ormighty glad yer hes gut Miss Flory, but thar hain't no time fer gab!"

The old scout whirled his horse, on the instant, starting back the way in which he came; his listeners concluding that the yells of the Indians over the river had alarmed him in regard to their safety.

Soon they reached the eastern edge of the timber, and gained their horses; eager, on account of Flora, to avoid again meeting the Indians. Their astonishment, however, was great, when they caught a view of the east plain toward Elm Fork, Single-Eye crying out:

"What in ther name o' Davy Crockett, d'yer make o' thet, Ole Rock?"

"Dang'd ef I knows, pard, 'ceptin' hit's a Gov'ment amblance," replied Old Rocky.

"Reckon she come from Phantom Hill, but hit's ormighty strange she ar' p'inted this-a-way."

"Thar's a half-dozen er so soger boyees," said Single-Eye; "an' ther Comanches 'll scoop in ther hull outfit, slick es a whistle!"

"Thar's 'bout how hit 'll eend off," said Old Rocky; "ef we-uns doesn't tak' a han' in ther game, an' mebbe so we'll git a send-off ter glory, ef we did."

"Reckon we'll run chances. What d'yer say, Will? We-uns kin put Miss Flory inter ther amblance, warn ther sogers, then turn an' all hump hit back to ther fort. Hit's ormighty queer though, the way they air travelin'," continued Single-Eye; "reckon they're lost. Tonk, what d'yer think o' ther new persiah o' things?"

"Ride fast to wheel-lodge, or long-knives (cavalry) lose scalps," answered the Tonkaway.

"Spur on then, friends," exclaimed Will Washburne.

Somewhat to their surprise, the escort and ambulance turned from its course, in the direction of our friends, as soon as such a distance had been reached as admitted of their color and probable character being determined.

Their presence at such an hour, and in such a dangerous locality, was a mystery to all; especially when it was reasoned that they must have passed the scene of the massacre, discovered the coach, and consequently must have known that a large war-party was in the near vicinity.

Soon, however, a sergeant of cavalry spurred forward from his men, and galloped toward our friends, crying out, when some twenty feet from the scouts:

"Glad to meet you; Single-Eye and Old Rocky! Is the war-party camped yonder in the timber, and did they not take captive a lady passenger from the stage? Meeting you scouts here, and knowing you at Phantom Hill, also of your knowledge of the movements of the red devils, leads me to ask these questions."

"Ya-as, Sergeant Hill," said Single-Eye, "ther condemned kites air camped yunder, an' yer war p'inted plum an' squar' fer losin' la'r, er we-uns wouldn't a' broke bush. They tuck a young gent an' a lady from ther bearse, but Ole Rocky an' Tonk an' me slid in on 'em, an' hev gut ther captives O. K."

"But turn yer outfit ormighty speedy, an' we-uns 'll try an' help yer outen therscape. Howsomever, fust off, we'll put ther leetle gal, what hes see'd 'nough o' bleed an' cussed doin's, inter ther waggin. Thar 'll gi'n' us another fightin' man, 'sides gittin' her in a safe place."

The sergeant was evidently surprised, rejoiced and relieved at this information. He looked with much interest at Flora, whom he perceived as the old scout alluded to her.

"Never mind the reds," said the sergeant. "We have put up a job on them. Captain Florence is making his way with sixty of our boys down the fork, and he must now be near their camp. But I have a great surprise for you, if I mistake not. It concerns the fair captive that you have released. I will now give the good news to a much interested party."

The sergeant spurred up to the ambulance, beckoning Will Washburne forward, and touched his hat to a middle-aged woman within, saying:

"Mrs. Florence, I am happy to inform you that the young lady captured by the Comanches has been rescued. She is here, and this gentleman wishes to place her with you for safety."

As the sergeant spoke Will slid from his horse and took Flora gently from the saddle, clasping her, as if dreading the separation.

Scarcely, however, had Sergeant Hill ceased speaking, when a cry from the lady in the ambulance startled them, and she sprung to the earth, clasping the wondering girl in her arms, and raining kisses upon her brow and cheeks and lips, exclaiming, at intervals:

"Oh, my God, I thank Thee! Flora, my long-lost babe, my darling! Lost to me since babyhood. Oh, my child! My child!"

"Turn yer condemned ole waggin an' spin toward Elm Fork!" yelled Single-Eye. "Take keer o' ther weemin. I'm dang'd ef thar's ary sign o' Cap Florence. Whoop-er up! Fun ahint, an' a hefty crop o' ha'r!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A COMANCHE ROUT.

No second command was needed for the driver of the ambulance to turn his team on the back trail; indeed, at the first sounding of the terrible war-cry from half a hundred savage throats, he had jerked the heads of his leaders around, and applied his "black snake" without mercy.

But the fierce and blood-curdling war-whoops of the Comanches failed to draw the attention of the reunited mother and daughter from each other. It is seldom, happily, that such a long separation between parent and child occurs; seldomer, unhappily, that there is any reunion, this side the grave, when it does. It would be useless, therefore, to seek to convey to the reader a description of the feelings that now controlled both.

The ambulance, as has been said, was now turned, and the mules lashed into a furious gallop toward Elm Fork; the scouts, with Will Washburne and the escort, galloping behind. All realized that certain death was in their rear, rushing like a tidal-wave to engulf them.

To their appalled view, at first, there seemed, indeed, not the slightest hope of escape. True, they might slay a number of the savage foe, but before the middle of the vast plain could be reached, they would certainly be butchered.

It was but too apparent that they had been caught in the trap which, as Sergeant Hill had said, they had laid for the Indians. It was plain that Captain Florence had been delayed, and the delay was likely to be a fatal one.

On the whole surface of the plain there was not one spot where a small party could defend themselves against odds, and that the Comanches could not, for any length of time, be resisted, was but too evident.

But there was on the face of every man a look of stern determination, which said plainly that they would sell their lives dearly if die they must.

The sight was a terrible one which now met the view of our friends and the cavalry escort, as they turned toward the west. The Indians had, evidently, lost no time in quipping their animals, upon recovering the same, and preparing for a dash on the plain, all thirsting for revenge. They had, as the scouts well knew, ranged themselves along the edge of the undergrowth, and were now lashing their horses at terrific speed from the timber, the beasts not yet entirely recovered from the stampede.

It was a perfect personation of horrible savage war.

On they dashed in the silvery moonlight, with all their grotesque trappings and glitter, the hundreds of hoofs flying through the grass and flowers, and sounding like the rush of a prairie fire; this, too, being accompanied by their blood-chilling war-whoops, and a dull rumble as of distant thunder.

It would have been impossible for any civilized being to view such a sight without a shudder of horror. Even a frontiersman, inured to border horrors, would mutter a prayer for instant death, that he might thus escape the fiendish torture to which, he knew, if captured, he would be condemned.

As matters stood, Single-Eye, Old Rocky and Turtle well knew that they were doomed. There was no escape. There was no way of meeting the enemy, with the least chance of saving the helpless women.

Their time seemed, indeed, to have come; and even the Tonkaway brought to mind his death-song.

Such was now the position of our friends.

The ambulance, containing Mrs. Florence and her daughter, was flying over the plain, as fast as the lash-maddened mules could gallop; while the scouts, and the escort of cavalry, with teeth set, and weapons tightly gripped, sped on in the rear of the vehicle in a line—the Comanche war-party thundering in pursuit, less than a mile behind them, and a quarter of a mile from the bottom timber.

Such was the scene in our tragic drama, when new actors appeared in the background; changing, at once, despair to hope, in the minds of those in whom we are most interested.

The new actors were a long double line of U. S. cavalry, who now dashed from the timber at the same point as had the Comanches, and shot in wild pursuit of the war-party, across the plain; their bugle blowing blasts that seemed heavenly music to our friends.

On came the boys in blue! On, with clattering sabers at their belts, and Colt's carbines in hand; their magnificent horses dashing forward, in far-reaching gallop, scattering flecks of foam on every side.

It was not long until the painted warriors began to realize that the "long-knives" would soon be within range, and that the terrible conical "blue whistlers" would hurtle through their ranks like hail.

There could be no such thing as escaping from the superior horses of the cavalry; and it was evident to the scouts that the Comanches were now in as hopeless a condition, as they themselves had at first been. Indeed, having foes both in their front and rear, it was more dangerous still.

It seemed strange that the cunning Comanches had thus allowed themselves to be entrapped; but all this was soon explained, for, as the scouts now gazed to the rear, they perceived another long line

of warriors dash from the timber at the same point.

Full three-score of these paint-daubed braves with whoops and yells of exultation, dashed up in the rear of the cavalry, while the main party of savages in front filled the air with their fierce and taunting yells.

The moonlit plain, so lately bare and silent, was now changed indeed. The boys in blue were encompassed by foes; while the scouts, ambulance, and escort were as good as counted out in the game.

It was evident to the scouts that the Comanches no longer had their capture in view; for their whole attention was now directed to the fast advancing cavalry, who, in turn, were gazing at the larger war-party, whose presence was undoubtedly a mystery.

Soon, however, it occurred to the scouts that the stampeded mustangs of the Indians must have been stopped in their mad flight by this later party, who had undoubtedly been expected by Rolling Thunder, or he would not have been so bold and reckless at such a short distance from Fort Phantom Hill.

It was soon made manifest, that the situation was fully realized by Captain Florence! for the rear line of cavalry halted, wheeling their steeds, and facing the foe, toward the timber. At the same time, the front line opened fire, with their long-range carbines, upon the warriors of Rolling Thunder.

Many braves fell, pierced with the ounce-balls of the carbines, which were discharged rapidly, until emptied of the five charges. They were then slung at the saddle-horn, and close range called for army revolvers.

Frenzied yells and fierce war-whoops followed the rattling discharge of the carbines, while riderless mustangs galloped hither and thither, crushing their dead and dying masters beneath their fast-flying hoofs. This caused Rolling Thunder and his braves to whirl their frantic steeds, and dash, in a mad and reckless charge, upon the troops.

At the same time, the war-party, last from the timber, lashed their mustangs forward, regardless of the hurtling rain of lead that thinned their ranks, upon the halted line of cavalry. This sudden charge, from east and west, brought a continuous rattle of revolvers, with clouds of arrows that cut the air; the moonlit plain being overhung with a cloud of smoke.

The scouts now saw the meaning of the desperate charge of the Indians, at the sacrifice of so many of their number. It was evident that the Comanches had ascertained that a detachment of cavalry was approaching their camp, but were ignorant of the number of the troops. They had, therefore, formed a plan to annihilate their animals; but had made a mistake in not all keeping together, and forming an ambush, so madly bent were they on their revenge.

Now seeing that the long range of guns would prove their destruction, they had taken the only course to prevent themselves from annihilation, by rushing to close quarters. This showed good judgment on their part. In fact, by thus acting, they had in a very short time settled matters; and the survivors of both war-parties were brought together by signal yells, at a point out of range from the cavalry.

The latter were now too demoralized, fatigued, and scattered, to pursue the enemy. But quite one half of the Indians lay dead or dying, on both battle-fields; and, here and there, were many of the soldiers, some dead, and some with the agony sweat upon their foreheads, born of the torturing shafts that pierced them.

The survivors of the two war-parties now, with vengeful yells, and howls from the slain, urged their mustangs northwest, disappearing in the timber; while the cavalry collected between the two death-strewn battle-fields. At this moment, the party under Rolling Thunder charged into the ranks of the cavalry.

Then Single-Eye, Old Rocky, Will and Turtle, with all the escort except two, who were ordered to halt the ambulance, and force the driver to return, galloped into the fight. This did much toward lessening the number of Rolling Thunder's braves, and the war-whoop of the Tonkaway sounded out, tauntingly, throughout the fearful hand-to-hand conflict.

Not one, it was found, when Captain Florence had given his orders in regard to the wounded and slain, had come out of the fight unscathed, although none were dangerously wounded. As the ambulance now came up toward the group, the captain called out:

"Gentlemen, will you relieve my mind by informing me if the young lady, who was captured by these inhuman monsters, has been rescued? I wish to know, also, if my sister, Mrs. Florence, is with you."

"Both ther weemin air O. K., Cap," said Single-Eye. "We-uns hes hed some consider'ble crawl'n' an' ridin' on ther trail 'fore yer roved, arter ther leetle gal; an' she air now, es I undercomstan's hit, wi' her mother, what hes comed from ther States, an' what hain't see'd her since she war a baby."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Captain Florence.

"I recognize you all now, my friends. Had I known you were on the trail, and that my niece was free, I would have taken more time, and had greater success. In fact, I don't think many braves would have gone west of Clear Fork again."

As the captain now rode up to the ambulance, Single-Eye cried:

"I say, Cap, hold on! Thar's two hellyuns from civerlize, what I reckon hed orter be strung up er limb. We-uns hes 'em tied in ther bush. Thar's Mister Washburne ahead o' yer—he'll 'splain 'bout 'em."

Waving his hand to the scouts, Captain Florence went forward to meet the approaching ambulance and greet, for the first time, his niece Flora.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AFTER THE STORM, A CALM.

WILL WASHBURN, who had left the scouts upon the approach of Captain Florence, reached the ambulance before that officer, he wishing to see Flora and her mother previous to making the acquaintance of the captain, and assisted his eager sweetheart to the ground.

"Oh, Will!" exclaimed the fair girl; "I am so thankful you have returned. I feared you would be killed!"

"I have had so much of horror and despair that I cannot but expect a return of the same in some

awful manner, even now, in my great joy at finding my mother. But come, Will; are you dreaming? Please assist my mother to alight. I have told her all about you."

The young man assisted Mrs. Florence to the ground, and now perceived, for the first time, that her daughter bore a very strong resemblance to her.

"Thanks, Mr. Washburne!" said the lady. "Ten thousand thanks for this, and for all that you have done for my child. But here comes Captain Florence, my daughter's uncle; he has given these wretched Indians a thrashing, it is to be hoped, they will remember."

Dismounting, the officer delivered his horse to an orderly, and advanced, with much admiration in his look, as he saw Flora, who met him, exclaiming:

"Dear uncle Forrest! I am so glad, so rejoiced to meet you, and to see that you are not wounded. I fear that this search has caused much trouble to you, as well as suffering and loss of life to others."

"My dear little much-wronged niece," said Captain Florence; "I cannot express my relief and joy at seeing you—meeting you, indeed, as one from the dead."

"Of course, I only knew you as a pretty little baby; but I had never quite given up the hope of some day finding you. Most earnestly do I pray that the happiness of your life to come may, in a measure, repay you for the much of which you have been deprived."

"When I think of the fiendish crimes of that monster, Mart Maxwell, I am rendered nearly frantic, at thinking that, in all these years, I have never been brought face to face with the dastard. As to your being the cause of any trouble or loss of life, my dear Flora, that is simply and entirely absurd."

"Had you not been in that coach, all would have been the same; for I should have followed the Comanches to their distant villages, and punished them for the brutal massacre. Mrs. Florence, I hope you have suffered no inconvenience or unnecessary alarm since we parted; but I suppose that is expecting too much from you, under the circumstances."

"I am very happy now, Forrest, as you must know; and I cannot find words to express myself."

"Allow me, however, to introduce the gentleman who was conducting Flora to you, to save her from further persecution—Captain Florence, Mr. William Washburne!"

"Extremely glad to form the acquaintance of any friend of my niece," said the officer, extending his hand; "especially one who has proved himself so devoted and self-sacrificing, and has shown himself a true soldier."

"Thanks for your compliments, captain!" returned the young man. "I, for my part, am very happy to meet you. But you have mentioned Mart Maxwell. I am pleased to inform you that we have that miscreant, and his confederate, one Rand Rogers, tied hand and foot, in the timber yonder."

"The wretches followed us to Texas, finding the wreck of the coach, and following the 'sign' from there into the bushes of Elm Fork, where they were captured by the Indians. They were rescued by Single-Eye and Turtle, who supposed them, it being night, to be Old Rocky and myself. They then disappeared—but, it is a long story; it will suffice to say, that they succeeded in getting Flora into their clutches, and that we rescued her, and now have the villains safe."

When Will ceased speaking, Captain Florence again grasped the young man's hand, saying:

"Mr. Washburne, this has indeed been an eventful night. We have recovered Flora, and have also in our power, the fiend who has so wronged her and hers."

"Do you and the scouts bring the two ruffians here, in order to make sure of them; for I fear they may escape, or be killed by some skulking Indians. Upon such a happy occasion as this, I do not wish to express my true feelings toward the wretch, Mart Maxwell, but his doom is fixed!"

"I will have them brought out on the plain at once," returned Will; "for I am as anxious as yourself, Captain Florence, to guard their escape."

"Mrs. Florence, I am somewhat puzzled in regard to your presence on the frontier. How did you become aware that your daughter was alive, may I ask, and also of her whereabouts?"

"That is easily and quickly explained," replied the lady. "Do you remember a little negro boy at the seminary where my daughter was placed by Maxwell?"

"Certainly I do, madame—very well. The little fellow was a faithful friend to both of us. It was through him that I informed Flora of my return from New Orleans."

"Well," said Mrs. Florence, "he found in the clump of trees where you and Florence had met previous to your departure, a memorandum of yours, containing the details of your detective service in the Crescent City, with the names of Mart Maxwell, Captain Florence, Ambrose Ashland and myself. There were also our addresses in full, with notes and comments in connection with our family history as far as it had become known to you."

"The little negro forwarded this memorandum to my father, where I have been residing, and he stated that the Flora Floyd who had left for Texas with Mr. Will Washburne had gone to join her uncle at Fort Davis. This caused me to start at once for Fort Belknap, where I learned that you and Flora were passengers on the previous coach. Captain Florence, I also learned, was then at Fort Phantom Hill."

"Judge of my horror and anguish when I found that the stage in which you had taken passage with Flora had been attacked, and that you and my darling had been taken captive! I waited at Fort Phantom Hill until the return thither of my brother-in-law, when he immediately started on the trail. You know the rest."

"I can explain everything more fully when we are at the fort. But I am so rejoiced that the villain, Maxwell, has been captured. When I was at Fort Belknap I heard that two strangers had been making inquiry about you and Flora, and that they had purchased horses and gone toward Phantom Hill."

"Captain, I hope we are soon to leave this blood-stained plain. The very atmosphere is horrible."

"I shall order a return immediately," was the re-

ply. "The dead boys must be buried, and the ambulance will serve to carry the wounded. This will oblige you and my niece to ride on horseback."

"However, we have now plenty of extra animals. I must leave you now, as I have much to attend to."

Having joined his pards, Will, with Old Rocky, Single-Eye and Turtle, proceeded toward the Clear Fork, southwesterly, toward the point where Maxwell and Rogers had been thrown into the thicket.

There lay the merciless abductors of Flora Florence, senseless and bound, where they had been left.

It was now not far from sunrise, and a detail which had been ordered to proceed to the timber at the Comanche camp and ascertain the whereabouts of the Indians, rode up and reported them as on the plain. There they had dismounted and were in a body, evidently waiting to bury their dead. The safe distance which they seemed particularly desirous of maintaining from the timber proved their dread of the fast and far-shooting guns, and that no further attack upon the cavalry was to be apprehended from them.

By order of Captain Florence, another detail now collected the horses of the slain; and it was decided to pack the dead upon animals to the fort; in order to prevent them from being exhumed by the Comanches, and scalped, as well as otherwise mutilated. The wounded were then placed in an ambulance, and started for the fort.

But one thing more remained. Mart Maxwell and Rand Rogers were bound fast to the backs of horses, and guarded at one side by Will and the scouts; they not wishing to mar the happiness of mother and daughter, by allowing them to behold the blood-stained, ragged and lacerated ruffians that had been the curse and cloud upon their lives.

Besides this thoughtful act on the part of Will and his friends, Single-eye vowed that he "wouldn't" low ther condemned kioters ter be gilded outside ther range o' his, an' Skip's peepers."

The prospect was, that, until they "glided over the range," on the "long dark trail," the old scout would religiously keep his vow.

CHAPTER XXX.

NEMESIS AT LAST.

As it was not deemed prudent to cross the Clear Fork, and again attack the Comanches, the preparations for the return to the fort were expeditiously performed; and, as the glorious Southern sun peeped above the horizon, the ambulance, filled with wounded, proceeded east, guarded by an escort, and close followed by Flora, her mother and Will Washburne.

The troops, led by Captain Florence, were close behind, while Single-eye and Old Rocky brought up the rear, leading by lariats two horses, fast bound upon the backs of which, were Mart Maxwell and Rand Rogers. The latter was as pale as death, his features being drawn, in abject terror; but the face of the former showed defiance and fiendish fury. A more miserable sight than either, could not be imagined.

Scratched and bleeding from many slight wounds, the clothing from their bodies being torn from the waists up, showing the livid and blue stripes of the torturing quirts, which had been plied without mercy by the Comanches, while the latter held captive.

The Tonkaway was not with the scouts, nor in the command; but all soon became aware of his location, for the rear of the expedition was not a rifle-shot from the west side of the battle-ground, when they were all brought to a halt.

It was the far-ringing war-cry of Turtle, that they now heard, in exultation and taunting intonation.

As it rung out again and again, it signaled the tearing of a scalp from the head of a Comanche brave, while he flourished the gory trophy about his plumed head, as the whoop of his tribe cut the air.

As the command moved again, they at times gazed backward at the flitting figure of the Tonkaway, with his flaunting feathers; but soon all were brought again to a halt. Out from the timber dashed a dozen infuriated Comanches, yelling like fiends, at this mutilation of their dead.

Turtle, nothing daunted, went on with his revolting task.

When, however, the braves were almost upon him, he vaulted suddenly into his saddle, and charged directly toward them, firing his revolver, as his horse sprung frantically forward. Both warriors fell to the earth, and before those in the rear could reach the spot, the Tonkaway had scalped them, and waving the fearful trophies in triumph, with a whoop of taunting derision, galloped toward his amazed prairie-pards, Single-Eye and Old Rocky.

Yells of rage now came from the Comanches, who urged their mustangs out from the screen of bushes at the bottom timber; but they kept their position near the same, fearing to invite another conflict.

In the middle of the forenoon all reached the Elm Fork, where a halt was made in the deserted Comanche camp, for rest and food. The scouts conveyed their villainous captives into a retired "open," and there bound them securely to saplings.

"Yer better say a pra'er er two, an' put a heft o' meanin' inter yer words," advised Single-Eye, as he secured Maxwell, "though I opines ef yer ever knowed one yer hes fergut hit. Ef ther old boss o' Tophet hain't gut a big mor'gidge on yer soul, ef yer hev any, I'm a dod-rotted liar, an' yer kin gamble heavy ther he air 'bout ter foreclose."

"I dare you to hang us!" said Maxwell, defiantly. "We have committed no crime, unless you call it such to rescue a maiden from the Comanches. You were simply jealous because we got ahead of you in that business. But you can prove nothing against us."

At these words of Mart, the face of his companion in crime seemed to brighten; but soon it resumed its terrified look, as Single-Eye replied:

"Dang yer ugly pictur! We-uns hes enough proof ter hang yer a dozen times over, an' we'll do hit, bet yer scalp! Jist yer wait, an' yer'll see what yer'll see. Sich scum es yer can't be 'lowed ter 'buse an' spile ther lives o' decent folkses. Don't say a word, er I'll slash yer years off now—dang'd ef I doesn't!"

Here Captain Florence, Will Washburne, and Turtle entered the "open," and Mart demanded, in a stately manner:

"Will you men please to cut us loose? This is an outrage! It is bad enough to have been treated as we have by the savages, without being insulted and abused by these half-savage border bullies."

"Keep your tongue to yourself," was the captain's answer, as with great difficulty he restrained himself, "or use it in pleading to your Maker for forgiveness for your many crimes. I know you, Mart Maxwell. Hal! You start; and well you may."

"I am Forrest Florence, the brother of the man you basely murdered on the Missouri river, and then abducted his wife and child, to incarcerate the former in a lunatic asylum, and to rear the latter as your ward, for the basest of purposes."

"Long have we searched for them both in vain; but, thanks to this noble young man"—pointing to Will—"who overheard your conversation and plotting with your comrade in New Orleans, after this villain, Rogers, had been liberated from prison, you were defeated. Again, it seems, you had nearly succeeded, after these brave men had rescued you from the Indians."

"We have found, in your saddle-bags, the clothing and jewelry worn by my brother's child, with a full description of her. Many papers also, valuable to the family, though useless to you, we have discovered. Plain proofs, you see, if any were needed."

"All this is false as h—l!" roared Maxwell, in fury, although his consternation had been most marked, as Captain Florence made these revelations.

"It is all false," he repeated, defiantly; "it is the wretched fabrication of that young upstart, to gain favor with you, that he may marry Flora Florence."

"I defy any of you to prove anything against me. The babe, it is true, came into my hands, and I reared her, that through her I might have my revenge for the insult that had been put upon me by her mother."

"But all this is no crime. Cut me loose, I say, or I will make you all suffer the full penalties of the law!"

"Dang my half-sister's black cat, ef we doesn't gi'n yer all ther lawyer keers fer!" broke out Single-Eye, his lone optic glowing with fury.

Will Washburne and Turtle stood, with folded arms looking upon the two villains in silence.

"This farce has gone on long enough," said the former at last. "The sight of that cowardly ruffian and murderer, infuriates me. I really believe that his companion would not have been a criminal, but for the influence of Mart Maxwell."

"Let sing death-song," put in the Tonkaway. "Heap bad white men. Run hide when cut loose from Comanches, then steal White Rose. Turtle want scalp."

"Dang'd ef I'd kerry ther mangy kioters' scalps 'bout me!" exclaimed Single-Eye in disgust.

"But, es Will says, hit hain't no use ter waste time on sich scum. Ef I war yeou, Cap Florence, I'd h'ist 'em up a limb, in two skips of a bighorn's crupper-holder!"

Will's last remark had given to Rand Rogers new courage. He braced up, and thus pleaded:

"Save my life, gentlemen! I am not in the least implicated in this man's crimes. I knew nothing of the murder of Colonel Florence, until Mart came to our cave, near the Missouri, with Mrs. Florence and her infant. He influenced me to agree to his plan for raising the wind by marrying Flora, though he had originally intended her for his own wife."

"He was deterred from that by his fear of being recognized upon returning with her to Missouri, to claim her fortune from Mr. Ashland, her grandfather."

Mart glared at Rand like an infuriated tiger.

The confession was sufficient, however, to decide the listeners to immediate action. A wave of the hand by Captain Florence, was followed by the cutting loose of Mart Maxwell; and Single-Eye and Old Rocky now dragged the miscreant into the main camp.

After a brief consultation, the others freed Rand Rogers, bidding him run for his life, or the scouts would hang him. Then all gathered in the clear space beneath the trees, in the old Comanche camp.

Mart Maxwell stood upon the back of a horse, a noose around his neck, and Single-Eye upon a branch above, was making fast the slack, Old Rocky holding the animal in position.

With bulging eyes and pallid face, his bravado all disappearing, Mart Maxwell thus stood upon the horse. He had not believed, until now, that they would dare execute him without proof of his crime; not dreaming that Rand would "peach," or that Mrs. Florence, the victim of his vengeance, was so near him.

"Mart Maxwell," said the captain, in a stern voice, "make your peace with God, for you have but five minutes to live. Confession is good for the soul."

"I confess only that I exult in what I have done," yelled the villain, who now saw that there was no longer a hope that his life would be saved.

"I did kill Frank Florence, when his soul was racked by the sight of his home sinking into the merciless waters of the mad Missouri."

"I swore to be revenged, eighteen long years ago, and I have, as far as in me lay, kept my oath. Had I not been a fool, and drank to excess in New Orleans, all my plans would have succeeded, and Flora Florence would have been the wife of that weak fool, Rand Rogers."

"I should have fingered the fortune, and glutted my revenge on the mother, by disclosing to her, when the proper time came, the character of her darling's husband."

Further words were prevented by the tightening of the rope by Single-Eye, and Mart would have been instantly lanced into eternity, had not a piercing, horrified yell, followed by a single Comanche way-cry, cut the air from down-stream. In an instant Turtle drew knife, and bounded from view.

Five minutes after he reappeared, waving another scalp over his head, as he cried out:

"Comanche brave kill Rand. Scalp Rand. Turtle kill Comanche. Scalp Comanche. It is good. Waugh!"

Again rung the war-whoop of the Tonkaway, and taking it as a signal, Old Rocky sprung aside, pricked the horse upon which stood the doomed ruffian, and

away the animal bounded, leaving the miscreant, Mart Maxwell, swaying in mid-air!

A few moments, and the body of the dastardly murderer hung motionless. Mart Maxwell's crime-stained soul had gone—God knows where!

Enough, however, of the clouded portion of the lives of those who have acted prominent parts in this tragic and trouble-filled life-drama.

We have but space to give mere mention, in a concluding chapter, of brighter prospects, beneath a clear and sunny sky, for all who are now leaving the dark shades of the Elm Fork.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"ALL, ALL AT HOME."

THE burial-ground at Fort Phantom Hill was a solemn sight on the following day, as the dead who had fallen in the conflict with the Comanches were borne to their last resting-place to the sound of muffled drums, and so near to the field of honor.

Both Flora Florence and her mother were assiduous in their care for the wounded, and the scouts and the brave Tonkaway came in each night loaded with small game and fish for the benefit of the sufferers, some of whom at length died from the steel arrow-points which remained in their wounds after the shafts had been removed.

High praise was accorded to Captain Florence by both the State and General Governments—the scouts and Turtle also receiving full credit for their services—and one month after the stirring and bloody scenes on the Brazos Forks, Mrs. Florence, Flora, and Will, guarded by an escort, traveled by ambulance to Fort Belknap, arriving safely at the latter place.

They then proceeded up the Missouri to the Ashland estate, where Flora's grandfather, who had been informed by letter of her coming, was actually made ill through the joy of again meeting his daughter, Mrs. Florence, and clasping in his aged arms the angelic granddaughter whom he had given up as forever lost to him.

The joy of the old man may be imagined, when we remember that these two were his only near relatives; and so relieved and happy was he that he welcomed Will Washburne as warmly as if he had been his own son.

When Rosa Florence had related to her father all the noble devotion and love of Will for Flora, it was agreed between them, that, as the dear girl had suffered so much, no bar should henceforth be placed by them between her and happiness. Hence, they resolved to sanction a marriage between Will and Flora, without waiting for any change in the circumstances, financially, of the former.

Will Washburne, as we have seen, was not one to press his suit with one so far above him in social position and wealth; and, although he had not abated, in the least, his devotion, he had made up his mind that he would carve out a fortune for himself, before asking the hand of Flora in marriage, from those to whom he had restored her.

However, the kind fates were engaged in working out for the young man, a brighter destiny, before a week had passed, after his arrival at the Ashland Plantation. Flora, one morning, rushed out beneath the wide-spreading oaks, where her lover was pacing, filled with thoughts and plans for the future, crying out, as she flourished a newspaper about her free flying tresses of spun gold:

"Oh, Will, I think here is news for you! Indeed, I almost know it refers to you, from what I have heard you say of your relatives! Do look, and read, Will!"

The young man took the paper eagerly and gazed at the item pointed out by Flora.

It read thus:

"NOTICE:—If William W. Washburne, aged twenty-two years, originally from Helena, Arkansas, but more recently a student near Shreveport, Louisiana, will communicate with Law & Law, solicitors, St. Louis, Missouri, he will hear of something to his advantage."

We need hardly state in detail that Will set out for St. Louis the next day, and there ascertained that his uncle, a wealthy cotton factor, and large owner in various river steamboats, had died, leaving him a vast fortune, which included an extensive plantation on the Missouri, but a few miles above St. Louis.

The young man was now in a position to marry forthwith, and the thought was happiness in itself. He, therefore, made no delay in asking the hand of Flora of her mother and grandfather, and they, though as yet ignorant of his good fortune, filled his cup of happiness to overflowing by telling him how proud they would be of him as the husband of their darling, who owed to him, as they themselves felt that they did in a sense, happiness, if not life.

The arrival of Captain Florence from Texas, on a visit to his sister-in-law and niece, was the signal for the grand wedding at Ashland.

It was indeed a most brilliant affair, the park-like grounds being gayly decorated with bunting and Chinese lanterns, and a brass band from St. Louis discoursing fine music at the dance beneath the trees, after the sumptuous wedding-feast, which was spread in the open air.

None attracted more attention, always excepting the bride and bridegroom, than Single-Eye, Old Rocky, and Turtle, the Tonkaway, whom Captain Florence had induced to accompany him.

The brave scouts and their Indian pard were attired in elegantly ornamented buckskin, with silver-mounted side-arms, presented by the captain and Will, but which, as Single-Eye asserted, made him feel "as stiff an' onnat'ral as a alligator-gar arter bein' blowed outen ther drink by a fust-class no'ther."

He further vowed, as did Old Rocky, that "soon as ther big picnic war over, he'd glide out on a stompede through the bush ter 'ar off some o' ther fancy fixin's, an' roll down ther bank inter ther Missouri a few times, ter git ther new rig sorter 'specterble, an' fittin' fer a frontier scout."

The occasion was a complete success, as it deserved to be. All passed off merrily, and Captain Florence, with Turtle and the scouts, returned to the Lone Star State, there to devote their time and lives to the protection of the border settlers. And there, for the present, we leave them to the practice of that virtue which is its own reward in the end.

While Will and Flora were on their bridal tour they visited Shreveport, where they sought out the little negro boy who had, by his intelligence—so uncommon to one in his sphere of life—been the means of so much good fortune to them. His happy thought of sending the document, which he had found, to Mr. Ashland, had been the means of sending Mrs. Florence to Texas in search of her daughter, and by her opportune arrival at Fort Phantom Hill, caused an immediate march of the troops, thus undoubtedly saving the lives of the brave, self-sacrificing scouts, with Flora, Will, and Turtle, the faithful Tonkaway.

Having returned, the young couple established their home at the plantation that had been bequeathed to Will by his uncle. Much of their time, however, was spent with Flora's grandfather; on the death of whom, which followed not long after, Mrs. Washburne induced her husband to remove to Ashland Plantation, as there she and her mother, so strangely and so long parted from each other, could be together for the remainder of their lives.

In this, as in the slightest wish of Flora's, Will readily acquiesced; the will of his beautiful, golden-haired wife being ever his greatest pleasure.

As years passed on, children grew up around them, the happy grandmother renewing her early and happier days in the warmth and light of their presence; and this in spite of her terrible experiences and long privation of an only daughter's love.

But ever, in the spring-time, when the river was swollen by freshets, her eyes would grow wild and her manner apprehensive, showing that memory was still painfully active at times.

Never could Rosabelle Florence forget, even amid all the love and happiness that so grew and increased in her life's eventide, that terrible night when home and husband were swallowed up forever by the merciless, mad Missouri.

THE END.

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